FANTASTIC

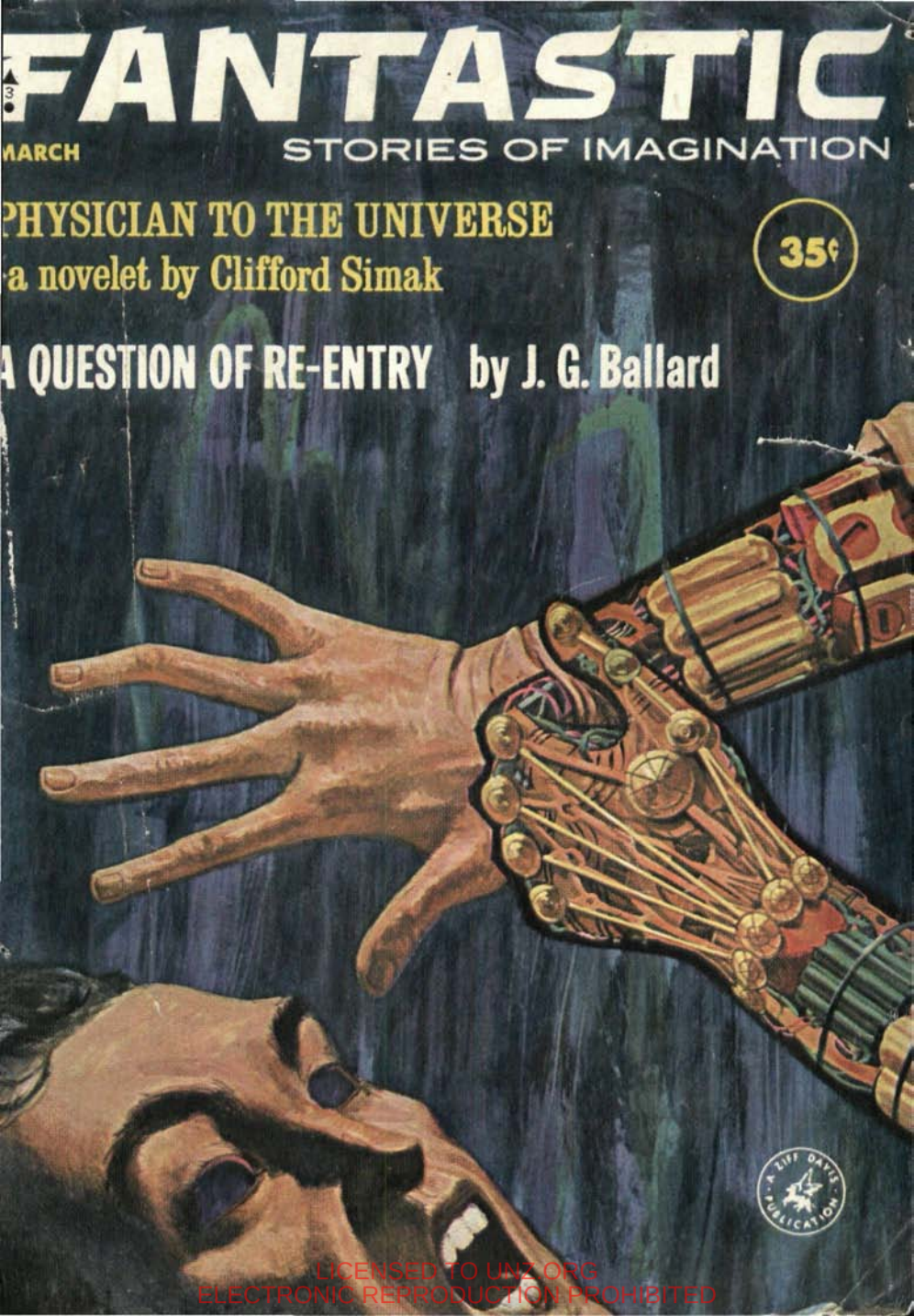
MARCH

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

PHYSICIAN TO THE UNIVERSE
a novelet by Clifford Simak

35¢

A QUESTION OF RE-ENTRY by J. G. Ballard



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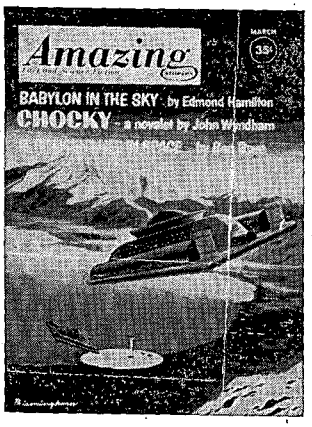

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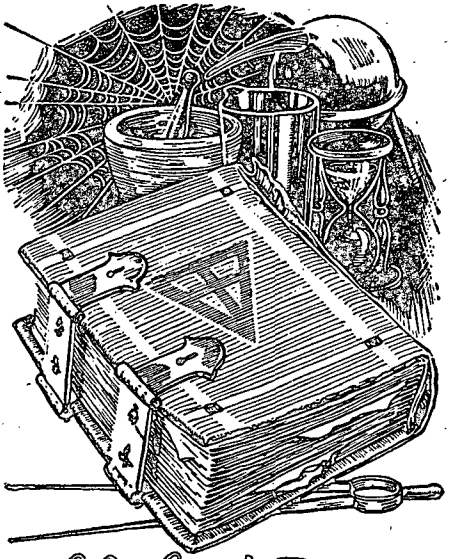

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FANTASTIC
STORIES OF IMAGINATION

MARCH 1963
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Editorial and Executive Offices
One Park Avenue
New York 16, New York
ORegon 9-7200
Advertising Manager,
Martin Gluckman

Midwestern and Circulation Office
434 South Wabash Avenue
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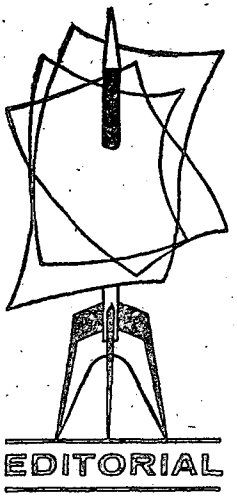

THE remorseless march of science really came home to roost in our editorial sanctum recently. You will note in this issue an excellent novelet by J. G. Ballard, titled *A Question of Re-Entry.* (see p. 46). It concerns the search for a moonship pilot believed to have crashed, upon his return from Luna, in the Amazonian jungles. It is explained that the pilot was unable to radio his exact location at the time his ship plunged down out of control, because the atmosphere was ionized by the heat of his re-entry, and the electrically-charged field blacked out his radio signals.

Well, at the time we bought and scheduled that story, and set it in type and closed the page forms, radio-blackout-due-to-ionization was a reality phenomenon. Enter, however, the remorseless march of science. Couple of weeks ago came the news from communications engineers working on experimental Air Force vehicles, that the ionization blackout problems has been solved. Equipment has been developed that will enable radio signals to penetrate the ionization field 99 per cent of time.

The breakthrough—literal as well as figurative—was made possible by the use of higher frequencies. New equipment will broadcast at frequencies of thousands of megacycles, far above those now practicable to use for high-performance voice and data transmissions. Previously these frequencies had been suitable only for "crude" transmissions—such as diathermy and the annealing of metals.

Ballard's theme had a real-life genesis when, on his three-orbit Mercury capsule flight last May, Scott Carpenter was cut off from radio communication with Cape Canaveral for four minutes during his re-entry. The new equipment will benefit not only astronauts; it will be even more important in the light of such projects as the experimental manned orbital gliders (originally named Dyna-Soar). Since the gliders are winged, the pilot's descent through the area where ionization would occur will be far longer; the blackout "sheath" could persist for 20 minutes or more—obviously too long to be out of touch with a ground control station. If you can overlook this bit of now-suddenly-anachronistic science in Ballard's story, we think you'll find the rest of it fascinating. Shows you what science-fiction writers (and editors!) have to contend with, nowadays.—N.L.

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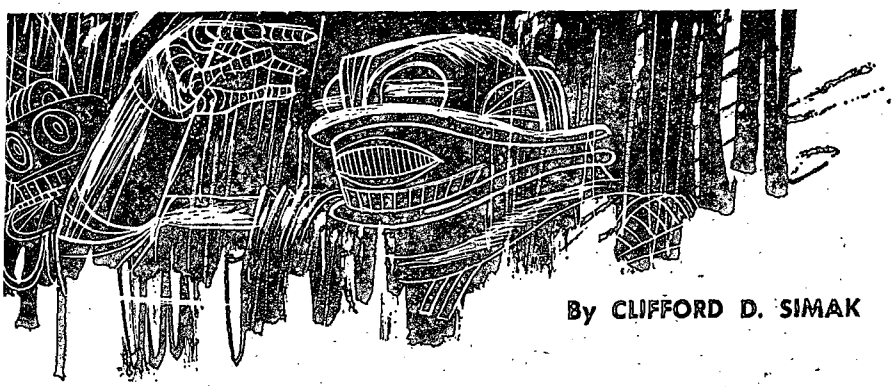

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

PHYSICIAN to the UNIVERSE

The statutes were quite clear: illness was a criminal offense, and the offender cast into Limbo. None came back from Limbo. But Alden Street was bound to try, although for a long time he did not know the reason.

Illustrator GAUGHAN

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HE awoke and was in a place he had never seen before. It was an unsubstantial place that flickered on and off and it was a place of dusk in which darker figures stood out faintly. There were two white faces that flickered with the place and there was a smell he had never known before—a dank, dark smell, like the smell of black, deep water that had stood too long without a current to stir it.

And then the place was gone and he was back again in that other place that was filled with brilliant light, with the marble eminence looming up before him and the head of the man who sat atop this eminence and behind it, so that one must look up, it seemed, from very far below to see him. As if the man were very high and one were very low, as if the man were great and one, himself, were humble.

The mouth in the middle of the face of the man who was high and great was moving and one strained to catch the sound of words, but there was only silence, a terrible, humming silence that shut one out from this brilliant place, that made one all alone and small and very unimportant—too poor and unimportant to hear the words that the great man might be saying. Although it seemed as if one knew the words, knowing there were no other words the great man might be allowed to say, that he had to say them because, despite his highness and his greatness, he was caught in the self-same trap as the little, humble being who stood staring up at him. The words were there, just beyond some sort of barrier one could not comprehend, and if one could pierce that barrier he'd know the words without having heard them said. And it was important that he know them, for they were of great concern to him—they were, in fact, about him and they would affect his life.

His mind went pawing out to find the barrier and to strip it from the words and even as he did, the place of brilliance tilted and he was back again in the dusk that flickered.

The white faces still were bent above him and one of the faces now came closer, as if it were floating down upon him—all alone, all by itself, a small white-faced balloon. For in the dark one could not see the body. If there were a body.

"You'll be all right," the white face said. "You are coming round."

"Of course I'll be all right," said Alden Street, rather testily.

For he was angry at the words, angry that here he could hear the words, but back in that place of brilliance he could hear no words at all—words that were important, while these words he had heard were no more than drivel.

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"Who said I wouldn't be all right?" asked Alden Street.

And that was who he was, but not entirely who he was, for he was more than just a name. Every man, he thought, was more than just a name. He was many things.

He was Alden Street and he was a strange and lonely man who lived in a great, high, lonely house that stood above the village and looked out across a wilderness of swampland that stretched toward the south until it went out of sight—farther, much farther than the human eye could see, a swamp whose true proportions could be drawn only on a map.

The house was surrounded by a great front yard and a garden at the rear and at the garden's edge grew a mighty tree that flamed golden in the autumn for a few brief hours, and the tree held something of magnificent importance and he, Alden Smith, was tied in with that great importance.

HE sought wildly for this great importance and in the dusk he could not find it. It had somehow slipped his grasp. He had had it, he had known it, he'd lived with it all his life, from the time of childhood, but he did not have it. It had left him somehow.

He went scrabbling after it, frantically, for it was something that he could not lose, plunging after it into the darkness of his brain. And as he scrambled after it, he knew the taste again, the bitter taste when he had drained the vial and dropped it to the floor.

He scrabbled in the darkness of his mind, searching for the thing he'd lost, not remembering what it was, with no inkling of what it might have been, but knowing he would recognize it once he came across it.

He scrabbled and he did not find it. For suddenly he was not in the darkness of his brain, but back once more in the place of brilliance. And angry at how he'd been thwarted in his search.

The high and mighty man had not started speaking, although Alden could see that he was about to speak, that at any moment now he would start to speak. And the strange thing of it was that he was certain he had seen this all before and had heard before what the high, great man was about to say. Although he could not, for the life of him, recall a word of it. He had been here before, he knew, not once, but twice before. This was a reel re-run, this was past happening.

"Alden Street," said the man so high above him, "you will stand and face me."

And that was silly, Alden thought, for he was already standing and already facing him.

"You have heard the evidence,"

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said the man, "that has been given here."

"I heard it," Alden said.

"What have you, then, to say in your self-defense?"

"Not a thing," said Alden.

"You mean you don't deny it?"

"I can't deny it's true. But there were extenuating circumstances."

"I am sure there were, but they're not admissable."

"You mean that I can't tell you . . ."

"Of course you can. But it will make no difference. The law admits no more than the commission of the crime. There can be no excuses."

"I would suppose, then," said Alden Street," there is nothing I can say. Your Honor, I would not waste your time."

"I am glad," said the judge, "that you are so realistic. It makes the whole thing simpler and easier. And it expedites the business of this court."

"But you must understand," said Alden Street, "that I can't be sent away. I have some most important work and I should be getting back to it."

"You admit," said the high, great man, "that you were ill for twenty-four full hours and failed most lamentably to report your illness."

"Yes," said Alden Street.

"You admit that even then you did not report for treatment, but rather that you were apprehended by a monitor."

Alden did not answer. It was piling up and there was no use to answer. He could see, quite plainly, that it would do no good.

"And, further, you admit that it has been some eighteen months since you have reported for your physical."

"I was far too busy."

"Too busy when the law is most explicit that you must have a physical at six month intervals?"

"You don't understand, Your Honor."

His Honor shook his head. "I am afraid I do. You have placed yourself above the law. You have chosen deliberately to flout the law and you must answer for it. Too much has been gained by our medical statutes to endanger their observance. No citizen can be allowed to set a precedence against them. The struggle to gain a sound and healthy people must be accorded the support of each and every one of us and I cannot countenance . . ."

The place of brilliance tilted and he was back in the dusk again.

HE lay upon his back and stared up into the darkness, and although he could feel the pressure of the bed on which he lay, it was as if he were suspended in some sort of dusky limbo that had no beginning and no end, that was nowhere and led

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nowhere, and was, in itself, the terminal point of all and each existence.

From somewhere deep inside himself he heard the questioning once again—the flat, hard voice that had, somehow, the sound of metal in it:

Have you ever taken part in any body-building program?

When was the last time that you brushed your teeth?

Have you ever contributed either time or money to the little leagues?

How often would you say that you took a bath?

Did you at any time ever express a doubt that sports developed character?

One of the white faces floated out of the darkness to hang above him once again. It was, he saw, an old face—a woman's face and kind.

A hand slid beneath his head and lifted it.

"Here," the white face said, "drink this."

He felt the spoon against his lips.

"It's soup," she said. "It's hot. It will give you strength."

He opened his mouth and the spoon slid in. The soup was hot and comforting.

The spoon retreated.

"Where . . ." he said.

"Where are you?"

"Yes," he whispered, "where am I? I want to know."

"This is Limbo," the white face said.

* * *

Now the word had meaning.

Now he could recall what Limbo was.

And he could not stay in Limbo.

It was inconceivable that anyone should expect that he should stay in Limbo.

He rolled his head back and forth on the thin, hard pillow in a gesture of despair.

If he only had more strength. Just a little while ago he had had a lot of strength. Old and wiry and with a lot of strength left in him. Strong enough for almost anything at all.

But shiftless, they had said back in Willow Bend.

And there he had the name. He was glad to have it back. He hugged it close against him.

"Willow Bend," he said, speaking to the darkness.

"You all right, old timer?"

He could not see the speaker, but he was not frightened. There was nothing to be frightened of. He had his name and he had Willow Bend and he had Limbo and in just a little while he'd have all the rest of it and then he'd be whole again and strong.

"I'm all right," he said.

"Kitty gave you soup. You want some more of it?"

"No. All I want is to get out of here."

"You been pretty sick. Tem-

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perature a hundred and one point seven."

"Not now. I have no fever now."

"No. But when you got here."

"How come you know about my temperature? You aren't any medic. I can tell by the voice of you that you aren't any medic. In Limbo, there would be no medic."

"No medic," said the unseen speaker. "But I am a doctor."

"You're lying," Alden told him. "There are no human doctors. There isn't any such a thing as doctors any more. All we have is medics."

"There are some of us in research."

"But Limbo isn't research."

"At times," the voice said, "you get rather tired of research. It's too impersonal and sterile."

ALDEN did not reply. He ran his hand, in a cautious rubbing movement, up and down the blanket that had been used to cover him. It was stiff and hard to the touch, but seemed fairly heavy.

He tried to sort out in his mind what the man had told him.

"There is no one here," he said, "but violators. What did you violate? Forget to trim your toenails? Short yourself on sleep?"

"I'm not a violator."

"A volunteer, perhaps."

"Nor a volunteer. It would do no good to volunteer. They would not let you in. That's the point to Limbo—that's the dirty rotten joke. You ignore the medics, so now the medics ignore you. You go to a place where there aren't any medics and see how well you like it."

"You mean that you broke in?"

"You might call it that."

"You're crazy," Alden Street declared.

For you didn't break into Limbo. If you were smart at all, you did your level best to stay away from it. You brushed your teeth and bathed and used one of the several kinds of approved mouth washes and you took care that you had your regular check-ups and you saw to it that you had some sort of daily exercise and you watched your diet and you ran as fast as you could leg it to the nearest clinic the first moment you felt ill. Not that you were often ill. The way they kept you checked, the way they made you live, you were very seldom ill.

He heard that flat, metallic voice clanging in his brain again, the disgusted, shocked, accusatory voice of the medic disciplinary corps.

Alden Street, it said, *you're nothing but a dirty slob.*

And that, of course, was the worst thing that he could be called. There was no other label that could possibly be worse. It

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was synonymous with traitor to the cause of the body beautiful and healthy.

"This place?" he asked. "It's a hospital?"

"No," the doctor said. "There's no hospital here. There is nothing here. Just me and the little that I know and the herbs and other woods specifics that I'm able to command."

"And this Limbo. What kind of Limbo is it?"

"A swamp," the doctor said. "An ungodly place, believe me."

"Death sentence?"

"That's what it amounts to."

"I can't die," said Alden.

"Some day," the calm voice said. "All men must."

"Not yet."

"No, not yet. You'll be all right in a few more hours."

"What was the matter with me?"

"You had some sort of fever."

"But no name for it."

"Look, how would I know? I am not . . ."

"I know you're not a medic. Humans can't be medics—not practicing physicians, not surgeons, not anything at all that has to do with the human body. But a human can be a medical research man because that takes insight and imagination."

"You've thought about this a lot," the doctor said.

"Some," Alden said. "Who has not?"

"Perhaps not as many as you think. But you are angry. You are bitter."

"Who wouldn't be? When you think about it."

"I'm not," the doctor said.

"But you . . ."

"Yes, I of all of us, should be the bitter one. But I'm not. Because we did it to ourselves. The robots didn't ask for it. We handed it to them."

AND that was right, of course, thought Alden. It had started long ago when computers had been used for diagnosis and for drug dosage computation. And it had gone on from there. It had been fostered in the name of progress. And who was there to stand in the way of progress?

"Your name," he said. "I'd like to know your name."

"My name is Donald Parker."

"An honest name," said Alden Street. "A good, clean, honest name."

"Now go to sleep," said Parker. "You have talked too long."

"What time is it?"

"It will soon be morning."

The place was dark as ever. There was no light at all. There was no seeing and there was no sound and there was the smell of evil dankness. It was a pit, thought Alden—a pit for that small portion of humanity which rebelled against or ignored or didn't, for one reason or another,

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go along with the evangelistic fervor of universal health. You were born into it and educated in it and you grew up and continued with it until the day you died. And it was wonderful, of course, but, God, how tired you got of it, how sick you got of it. Not of the program or the law, but of the unceasing vigilance, of the spirit of crusading against the tiny germ, of the everlasting tilting against the virus and the filth, of the almost religious ardor with which the medic corps kept its constant watch.

Until in pure resentment you longed to wallow in some filth; until it became a mark of bravado not to wash your hands.

For the statutes were quite clear—illness was a criminal offense and it was a misdemeanor to fail to carry out even the most minor precaution aimed at keeping healthy.

It started with the cradle and it extended to the grave and there was a joke, never spoken loudly (a most pathetic joke), that the only thing now left to kill a person was a compelling sense of boredom. In school the children had stars put against their names for the brushing of the teeth, for the washing of the hands, for regular toilet habits, for many other tasks. On the playground there was no longer anything so purposeless and foolish (and even criminal) as haphazard play, but instead meticulously worked out programs of calisthenics aimed at the building of the body. There were sports program on every level, on the elementary and secondary school levels, on the college level, neighborhood and community levels, young folks, young marrieds, middle-aged and old folks levels—every kind of sports, for every taste and season. They were not spectator sports. If one knew what was good for him, he would not for a moment become anything so useless and so suspect as a sports spectator.

TOBACCO was forbidden, as were all intoxicants (tobacco and intoxicants now being little more than names enacted in the laws), and only wholesome foods were allowed upon the market. There were no such things now as candy or soda pop or chewing gum. These, along with liquor and tobacco, finally were no more than words out of a distant past, something told about in bated breath by a garrulous oldster who had heard about them when he was very young, who might have experienced or heard about the last feeble struggle of defiance by the small fry mobs which had marked their final stamping out.

No longer were there candy-runners or pop bootleggers or the furtive sale in some dark alley of a pack of chewing gum.

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Today the people were healthy and there was no disease—or almost no disease. Today a man at seventy was entering middle age and could look forward with some confidence to another forty years of full activity in his business or profession. Today you did not die at eighty, but barring accident, could expect to reach a century and a half.

And this was all to the good, of course, but the price you paid was high.

"Donald Parker," said Alden.

"Yes," said the voice from the darkness.

"I was wondering if you were still here."

"I was about to leave. I thought you were asleep."

"You got in," said Alden. "All by yourself, I mean. The medics didn't bring you."

"All by myself," said Parker

"Then you know the way. Another man could follow."

"You mean someone else could come in."

"No. I mean someone could get out. They could backtrack you."

"No one here," said Parker. "I was in the peak of physical condition and I made it only by the smallest margin. Another five miles to go and I'd never made it."

"But if one man . . ."

"One man in good health. There is no one here could make it. Not even myself."

"If you could tell me the way."

"It would be insane," said Parker. "Shut up and go to sleep."

Alden listened to the other moving, heading for the unseen door.

"I'll make it," Alden said, not talking to Parker, nor even to himself, but talking to the dark and the world the dark enveloped.

For he had to make it. He must get back to Willow Bend. There was something waiting for him there and he must get back.

* * *

Parker was gone and there was no one else.

The world was quiet and dark and dank. The quietness was so deep that the silence sang inside one's head.

Alden pulled his arms up along his sides and raised himself slowly on his elbows. The blanket fell off his chest and he sat there on the bed and felt the chill that went with the darkness and the dankness reach out and take hold of him.

He shivered, sitting there.

He lifted one hand, cautiously, and reached for the blanket, intending to pull it up around himself. But with his fingers clutching its harsh fabric, he did not pull it up. For this, he told himself, was not the way to do it. He could not cower in bed, hiding underneath a blanket.

Instead of pulling it up, he thrust the blanket from him and

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his hand went down to feel his legs. They were encased in cloth —his trousers still were on him, and his shirt as well, but his feet were bare. Maybe his shoes were beside the bed, with the socks tucked inside of them. He reached out a hand and felt, groping in the dark—and he was not in bed. He was on a pallet of some sort, laid upon the floor, and the floor was earth. He could feel the coldness and the dampness of its packed surface as he brushed it with his palm.

There were no shoes. He groped for them in a wide semicircle, leaning far out to reach and sweep the ground.

Someone had put them someplace else, he thought. Or, perhaps, someone had stolen them. In Limbo, more than likely, a pair of shoes would be quite a treasure. Or perhaps he'd never had them. You might not be allowed to take your shoes with you into Limbo—that might be part of Limbo.

No shoes, no toothbrushes, no mouth washes, no proper food, no medicines or medics. But there was a doctor here—a human doctor who had broken in, a man who had committed himself to Limbo of his own free will.

What kind of man would you have to be, he wondered, to do a thing like that? What motive would you have to have to drive you? What kind of idealism, or what sort of bitterness, to sustain you along the way? What sort of love, or hate, to stay?

HE sat back on the pallet, giving up his hunt for shoes, shaking his head in silent wonderment at the things a man could do. The human race, he thought, was a funny thing. It paid lip service to reason and to logic, and yet more often it was emotion and illogic that served to shape its ends.

And that, he thought, might be the reason that all the medics now were robots. For medicine was a science that only could be served by reason and by logic and there was in the robots nothing that could correspond to the human weakness of emotion.

Carefully he swung his feet off the pallet and put them on the floor, then slowly stood erect. He stood in dark loneliness and the dampness of the floor soaked into his soles.

Symbolic, he thought—unintentional, perhaps, but a perfect symbolic introduction to the emptiness of this place called Limbo.

He reached out his hands, groping for some point of reference as he slowly shuffled forward.

He found a wall, made of upright boards, rough sawn with the tough texture of the saw blade unremoved by any planing, and with uneven cracks where

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they had been joined together.

Slowly he felt his way along them and came at last to the place they ended. Groping, he made out that he had found a doorway, but there was no door.

He thrust a foot over the sill, seeking for the ground outside, and found it, almost even with the sill.

Quickly, as if he might be escaping, he swung his body through the door and now, for the first time, there was a break in darkness. The lighter sky etched the outline of mighty trees and at some level which stood below the point he occupied he could make out a ghostly whiteness that he guessed was ground fog, more than likely hanging low above a lake or stream.

He stood stiff and straight and took stock of himself. A little weak and giddy, and a coldness in his belly and a shiver in his bones, but otherwise all right.

He put up a hand and rubbed it along his jaw and the whiskers grated. A week or more, he thought, since he had shaved—it must have been that long, at least. He tried to drive his mind back to find when he'd last shaved, but time ran together like an oily fluid and he could make nothing of it.

He had run out of food and had gone downtown, the first time in many days—not wanting to go even then, but driven by his hunger. There wasn't time to go, there was time for nothing, but there came a time when a man must eat. How long had it really been, he wondered, that he'd gone without a bite to eat, glued to the task that he was doing, that important task which he'd now forgotten, only knowing that he had been doing it and that it was unfinished and that he must get back to it.

Why had he forgotten? Because he had been ill? Was it possible that an illness would make a man forget?

Let's start, he thought, at the first beginning. Let's take it slow and simple. One step at a time, carefully and easily; not all in a rush.

HIS name was Alden Street and he lived in a great, high, lonely house that his parents had built almost eighty years ago, in all its pride and arrogance, on the mound above the village. And for this building on the mound above the village, for the pride and arrogance, his parents had been hated, but for all the hate had been accepted since his father was a man of learning and of great business acumen and in his years amassed a small-sized fortune dealing in farm mortgages and other properties in Mataloosa county.

With his parents dead, the hate transferred to him, but not the

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acceptance that had gone hand-in-hand with hate, for although he had a learning gathered from several colleges, he put it to no use—at least to no use which had made it visible to the village. He did not deal in mortgages nor in properties. He lived alone in the great, high house that now had gone to ruin, using up, bit by bit, the money his father had laid by and left him. He had no friends and he sought no friends. There were times when he did not appear on the village streets for weeks on end, although it was known that he was at home. For watching villagers could see the lights burning in the high and lonesome house, come nights.

At one time the house had been a fine place, but now neglect and years had begun to take their toll. There were shutters that hung crooked and a great wind years before had blown loosened bricks from the chimney top and some of the fallen bricks still lay upon the roof. The paint had peeled and powdered off and the front stoop had sunk, its foundation undermined by a busily burrowing gopher and the rains that followed. Once the lawn had been neatly kept, but now the grass grew rank and the shrubs no longer knew the shears and the trees were monstrous growths that almost screened the house from view. The flower beds, cherished by his mother, now were gone, long since choked out by weeds and creeping grass.

It was a shame, he thought, standing in the night. I should have kept the place the way my mother and my father kept it, but there were so many other things.

The people in the village despised him for his shiftlessness and his thoughtlessness which allowed the pride and arrogance to fall into ruin and decay. For hate as they might the arrogance, they still were proud of it. They said he was no good. They said that he was lazy and that he didn't care.

But I did care, he thought. I cared so very deeply, not for the house, not for the village, not even for myself. But for the job—the job that he had not selected, but rather that had been thrust upon him.

Or was it a job, he wondered, so much as a dream?

Let's start at the first beginning, he had told himself, and that was what he had meant to do, but he had not started at the first beginning; he had started near the end. He had started a long way from the first beginning.

HE stood in the darkness, with the treetops outlined by the lighter sky and the white ghost fog that lay close above the water, and tried to swim against

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the tide of time back to that first beginning, back to where it all had started. It was far away, he knew, much farther than he'd thought, and it had to do, it seemed, with a late September butterfly and the shining gold of falling walnut leaves.

He had been sitting in a garden and he had been a child. It was a blue and wine-like autumn day and the air was fresh and the sun was warm, as anything only can be fresh and warm when one is very young.

The leaves were falling from the tree above in a golden rain and he put out his hands to catch one of the falling leaves, not trying to catch any single one of them, but holding out his hands and knowing that one of them would drift into a palm—holding out his hands with an utter childish faith, using up in that single instant the only bit of unquestioning faith that any man can know.

He closed his eyes and tried to capture it again, tried to become in this place of distant time the little boy he had been on that day the gold had rained down.

He was there, but it was hazy and it was not bright and the clearness would not come—for there was something happening, there was a half-sensed shadow out there in the dark and the squish of wet shoes walking on the earth.

His eyes snapped open and the autumn day was gone and someone was moving toward him through the night, as if a piece of the darkness had detached itself and had assumed a form and was moving forward.

He heard the gasp of breath and the squish of shoes and then the movement stopped.

"You there," said a sudden, husky voice. "You standing there, who are you?"

"I am new here. My name is Alden Street."

"Oh, yes," the voice said. "The new one. I was coming up to see you."

"That was good of you," said Alden.

"We take care of one another here," the voice said. "We care for one another. We are the only ones there are. We really have to care."

"But you. . . ."

"I am Kitty," said the voice. "I'm the one who fed you soup."

* * *

She struck the match and held it cupped within her hands as if she sought to protect the tiny flame against the darkness.

Just the three of us, thought Alden—the three of us arraigned against the dark. For the blaze was one of them, it had become one with them, holding life and movement, and it strove against the dark.

He saw that her fingers were

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thin and sensitive, delicate as some old vase fashioned out of porcelain.

She bent with the flame still cupped within her hand and touched it to a candle stub thrust into a bottle that, from the height of it, stood upon a table, although one could not see the table.

"We don't often have a light," said Kitty. "It is a luxury we seldom can afford. Our matches are so few and the candles are so short. We have so little here."

"There is no need," said Alden.

"But there is," said Kitty. "You are a new one here. We cannot let you go stumbling in the dark. For the first little while we make a light for you."

The candle caught and guttered, sending flickering shadows fleeing wildly. Then it steadied and its feeble glow cut a circle in the dark.

"It will soon be morning," Kitty told him, "and then the day will come and the light of day is worse than the darkness of the night. For in the day you see and know. In the dark, at least, you can think that it is not too bad. But this is best of all—a little pool of light to make a house inside the darkness."

She was not young, he saw. Her hair hung in dank strings about her face and her face was pinched and thin and there were lines upon it. But there was, he thought, back of the stringiness and the thinness and the lines, a sense of some sort of eternal youthfulness and vitality that nothing yet had conquered.

The pool of light had spread a little as the flame had settled down and now he could see the place in which they stood.

IT was small, no more than a hut. There was the pallet on the floor and the blanket where he'd tossed it from him. There was a crazy-legged table upon which the candle stood and two sawed blocks of wood to serve as chairs. There were two plates and two white cups standing on the table.

Cracks gaped between the upright boards that formed the walls of the hut and in other places knots had dried and fallen out, leaving peepholes to the world outside.

"This was your place," he said. "I would not have inconvenienced you."

"Not my place," she said. "Harry's place, but it's all right with Harry."

"I'll have to thank him."

"You can't," she said. "He's dead. It is your place now."

"I won't need a place for long," said Alden. "I won't be staying here. I'll be going back."

She shook her head.

"Is there anyone who's tried?"

"Yes. They've all come back.

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You can't beat the swamp."

"Doc got in."

"Doc was big and strong and well. And there was something driving him."

"There's something driving me as well."

She put up a hand and brushed the hair out of her eyes. "No one can talk you out of this? You mean what you are saying?"

"I can't stay," he said.

"In the morning," she told him, "I'll take you to see Eric."

The candle flame was yellow as it flickered in the room and again the golden leaves were raining down. The garden had been quiet and he'd held out his hands, palms upward, so the leaves would fall in them. Just one leaf, he thought—one leaf is all I want, one leaf out of all the millions that are falling.

He watched intently and the leaves went past, falling all about him, but never a one to fall into his hands. Then, suddenly, there was something that was not a leaf—a butterfly that came fluttering like a leaf from nowhere, blue as the haze upon the distant hills, blue as the smoky air of autumn.

For an instant the butterfly poised above his outstretched palms and then mounted swiftly upward, flying strongly against the downward rain of leaves, a mote of blue winging in the goldenness.

He watched it as it flew, until it was lost in the branches of the tree, and then glanced back at his hands and there was something lying in his palm, but it was not a leaf.

It was a little card, two inches by three or such a matter, and it was the color of the leaves, but its color came from what seemed to be an inner light, so that the card shone of itself rather than shining by reflected light, which was the way one saw the color of the leaves.

He sat there looking at it, wondering how he could catch a card when no cards were falling, but only leaves dropping from the tree. But he had taken it and looked at it and it was not made of paper and it had upon its face a picture that he could not understand.

AS he stared at it his mother's voice called him in to supper and he went. He put the card into his pocket and he went into the house.

And under ordinary circumstances the magic would have vanished and he never would have known such an autumn day again.

There is only one such day, thought Alden Street, for any man alive. For any man alive, with the exception of himself.

He had put the card into his pocket and had gone into the house for supper and later on

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that evening he must have put it in the drawer of the dresser in his room, for that was where he'd found it in that later autumn.

He had picked it up from its forgotten resting place and as he held it in his hand, that day of thirty years before came back to him so clearly that he could almost smell the freshness of the air as it had been that other afternoon. The butterfly was there and its blueness was so precise and faithful that he knew it had been imprinted on his brain so forcefully that he held it now forever.

He had put the card back carefully and had walked down to the village to seek out the realtor he'd seen the day before.

"But, Alden," said the realtor, "with your mother gone and all, there is no reason for your staying. There is that job waiting in New York. You told me yesterday."

"I've been here too long," said Alden. "I am tied too close. I guess I'll have to stay. The house is not for sale."

"You'll live there all alone? In that big house all alone?"

"There's nothing else to do," said Alden.

He had turned and walked away and gone back to the house to get the card out of the dresser drawer again.

He sat and studied the drawing that was on the face of it, a funny sort of drawing, no kind of drawing he had ever seen before, not done with ink or pencil nor with brush. What, in the name of God, he thought, had been used to draw it?

And the drawing itself? A many-pointed star? A rolled-up porcupine? Or a gooseberry, one of the prickly kind, many times enlarged?

It did not matter, he knew, neither how the drawing had been made, or the strange kind of stiff, silken fabric that made the card itself, or what might be represented in the drawing. The important thing was that, many years before, when he had been a child, he had sat beneath the tree and held out his hand to catch a falling leaf and had caught the card instead.

He carried the card over to a window and stared out at the garden. The great walnut tree still stood as it had stood that day, but it was not golden yet. The gold must wait for the coming of first frost and that might be any day.

He stood at the window, wondering if there'd be a butterfly this time, or if the butterfly were only part of childhood.

"It will be morning soon," said Kitty. "I heard a bird. The birds are astir just before first light."

"Tell me about this place," said Alden.

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"It is a sort of island," Kitty told him. "Not much of an island. Just a foot or two above the water level. It is surrounded by water and by muck. They bring us in by heliocoptor and they let us down. They bring in food the same way. Not enough to feed us. Not enough of anything. There is no contact with them."

"Men or robots? In the ship, I mean."

"I don't know. No one ever sees them. Robots, I'd suspect."

"Not enough food, you say."

SHE shook her head. "There is not supposed to be. That's a part of Limbo. We're not supposed to live. We fish, we gather roots and other things. We get along somehow."

"And we die, of course."

"Death comes to everyone," she said. "To us just a little sooner."

She sat crouched upon one of the lengths of wood that served as a chair and as the candle guttered, shadows chased across her face so that it seemed the very flesh of it was alive and crawling.

"You missed sleep on account of me," he said.

"I can sleep any time. I don't need much sleep. And, besides, when a new one comes . . ."

"There aren't many new ones?"

"Not as many as there were. And there always is a chance. With each new one there's a chance."

"A chance of what?"

"A chance he may have an answer for us."

"We can always run away."

"To be caught and brought back? To die out in the swamp? That, Alden, is no answer."

She rocked her body back and forth. "I suppose there is no answer."

But she still held hope, he knew. In the face of all of it, she had kept a hope alive.

* * *

Eric once had been a huge man, but now he had shrunken in upon himself. The strength of him was there as it had always been, but the stamina was gone. You could see that, Alden told himself, just by looking at him.

Eric sat with his back against a tree. One hand lay in his lap and the other grubbed idly, with blunt and dirty fingers, at the short ground.

"So you're bent on getting out?" he asked.

"He talked of nothing else," said Kitty.

"You been here how long?"

"They brought me here last night. I was out on my feet. I don't remember it."

"You don't know what it's like."

Alden shook his head. "I don't intend to find out, either. I figure if I'm going, I'd best be going

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now before this place wears me down."

"Let me tell you," Eric said. "Let me tell you how it is. The swamp is big and we're in the center of it. Doc came in from the north. He found out, some way, the location of this place, and he got hold of some old maps. Geologic survey maps that had been made years ago. He studied them and figured out the best way for getting in. He made it, partly because he was strong and healthy . . . but mostly it was luck. A dozen other men could try it, just as strong as he was, and all of them might be lost because they weren't lucky. There are quicksand and alligators. There are moccasins and rattlesnakes. There is the killing heat. There are the insects and no water fit to drink.

"Maybe if you knew exactly the way to go you might manage it, but you'd have to hunt for the way to go. You'd have to work your way through the swamp and time after time you'd run into something that you couldn't get through or over and have to turn back and hunt another way. You'd lose a lot of time and time would work against you."

"How about food?"

"If you weren't fussy, food would be no trouble. You could find food along the way. Not the right kind. Your belly might not like it. You'd probably have dysentery. But you wouldn't starve."

"This swamp," asked Alden, "where is it?"

"Part in Mataloosa county. Part in Fairview. It's a local Limbo. They all are local Limbos. There aren't any big ones. Just a lot of little ones."

Alden shook his head. "I can see this swamp from the windows of my house. I never heard of a Limbo being in it."

"It's not advertised," said Eric. "It's not put on maps. It's not something you'd hear of."

"How many miles? How far to the edge of it?"

"Straight line, maybe thirty, maybe forty. You'd not be traveling a straight line."

"And the perimeter is guarded."

"Patrols flying overhead. Watching for people in the swamp. They might not spot you. You'd do your best to stay under cover. But chances are they would. And they'd be waiting for you when you reached the edge."

"And even if they weren't," Kitty said, "where would you go? A monitor would catch you. Or someone would spot you and report. No one would dare to help a refugee from Limbo."

THE tree beneath which Eric sat was a short distance from the collection of huddled huts that served as shelter for the inhabitants of Limbo.

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Someone, Alden saw, had built up the community cooking fire and a bent and ragged man was coming up from the water's edge, carrying a morning's catch of fish. A man was lying in the shade of one of the huts, stretched out on a pallet. Others, both men and women, sat in listless groups.

The sun had climbed only part way up the eastern sky, but the heat was stifling. Insects buzzed shrilly in the air and high in the light blue sky birds were swinging in great and lazy circles.

"Doc would let us see his maps?"

"Maybe," Eric said. "You could ask him."

"I spoke to him last night," said Alden. "He said it was insane."

"He is right," said Eric.

"Doc has funny notions," Kitty said. "He doesn't blame the robots. He says they're just doing a job that men have set for them. It was men who made the laws. The robots do no more than carry out the laws."

And Doc, thought Alden, once again was right.

Although it was hard to puzzle out the road by which man had finally come to his present situation. It was overemphasis again, perhaps, and that peculiar social blindness which came as the result of overemphasis.

Certainly, when one thought of it, it made no particular sense. A man had a right to be ill. It was his own hard luck if he happened to be ill. It was no one's business but his own. And yet it had been twisted into an action that was on a par with murder. As a result of a well-intentioned health crusade which had gotten out of hand, what at one time had been misfortune had now become a crime.

Eric glanced at Alden. "Why are you so anxious to get out? It'll do no good. Someone will find you, someone will turn you in. You'll be brought back again."

"Maybe a gesture of defiance," Kitty said. "Sometimes a man will do a lot to prove he isn't licked. To show he can't be licked."

"How old are you?" asked Eric.

"Fifty four," said Alden.

"Too old," said Eric. "I am only forty and I wouldn't want to try it."

"Is it defiance?" Kitty asked.

"No," Alden told her, "not that. I wish it was. But it's not as brave as that. There is something that's unfinished."

"All of us," said Eric, "left some unfinished things behind us."

* * *

The water was black as ink and seemed more like oil than water. It was lifeless; there was no sparkle in it and no glint; it

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soaked up the sunlight rather than reflecting it. And yet one felt that life must lurk beneath it, that it was no more than a mask to hide the life beneath it.

It was no solid sheet of water, but an infiltrating water that snaked its way around the hummocks and the little grassy islands and the water-defying trees that stood knee-deep in it. And when one glanced into the swamp, seeking to find some pattern to it, trying to determine what kind of beast it was, the distance turned to a cruel and ugly greenness and the water, too, took on that tint of fatal green.

Alden crouched at the water's edge and stared into the swamp, fascinated by the rawness of the green.

Forty miles of it, he thought. How could a man face forty miles of it? But it would be more than forty miles. For, as Eric had said, a man would run into dead-ends and would be forced to retrace his steps to find another way.

Twenty-four hours ago, he thought, he had not been here. Twenty four hours ago or a little more he had left the house and gone down into the village to buy some groceries. And when he neared the bank corner he had remembered that he had not brushed his teeth—for how long had it been?—and that he had not bathed for days. He should have taken a bath and brushed his teeth and done all the other things that were needful before he had come down town, as he always had before—or almost every time before, for there had been a time or two as he passed the bank that the hidden monitor had come to sudden life and bawled in metallic tones that echoed up and down the street: "Alden Street did not brush his teeth today! Shame on Alden Street, he did not brush his teeth (or take a bath, or clean his fingernails, or wash his hands and face, or whatever it might be.)" Keeping up the clatter and the clamor, with the ringing of alarm bells and the sound of booming rockets interspersed between each shaming accusation, until one ran off home in shame to do the things he'd failed.

In a small village, he thought, you could get along all right. At least you could until the medics got around to installing home monitors as they had in some of the larger cities. And that might take them years.

But in Willow Bend it was not so hard to get along. If you just remembered to comply with all the regulations you would be all right. And even if you didn't, you knew the locations of the monitors, one at the bank and the other at the drugstore corner, and you could keep out of their way. They couldn't spot your short-

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comings more than a block away.

ALTHOUGH generally it was safer to comply with the regulations before you went down town. And this, as a rule, he'd done, although there had been a time or two when he had forgotten and had been forced to go running home with people standing in the street and snickering and small boys catcalling after him while the monitor kept up its unholy din. And later on that day, or maybe in the evening, the local committee would come calling and would collect the fine that was set out in the book for minor misdemeanors.

But on this morning he had not thought to take a bath, to brush his teeth, to clean his fingernails, to make certain that his toenails were trimmed properly and neat. He had worked too hard and for too long a time and had missed a lot of sleep (which, also, was a thing over which the monitor could work itself into a lather) and, remembering back, he could recall that he seemed to move in a hot, dense fog and that he was weak from hunger and there was a busy, perhaps angry fly buzzing in his head.

But he did remember the monitor at the bank in time and detoured a block out of his way to miss it. But as he came up to the grocery store (a safe distance from the bank and the drugstore monitors), he had heard that hateful metallic voice break out in a scream of fright and indignation.

"Alden Street is ill!" it screamed. "Everybody stay away from Alden Street. He is ill—don't anyone go near him!"

The bells had rung and the siren blown and the rockets been shot off, and from atop the grocery store a great red light was flashing.

He had turned to run, knowing the dirty trick that had been played upon him. They had switched one of the monitors to the grocery, or they had installed a third.

"Stay where you are!" the monitor had shouted after him. "Go out into the middle of the street away from everyone."

And he had gone. He had quit his running and had gone out into the middle of the street and stayed there, while from the windows of the business houses white and frightened faces had stared out at him. Had stared out at him—a sick man and a criminal.

The monitor had kept on with its awful crying and he had cringed out there while the white and frightened faces watched and in time (perhaps a very short time, although it had seemed long), the disciplinary robots on the medic corps had arrived from the county seat.

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Things had moved swiftly then. The whole story had come out. Of how he had neglected to have his physicals. Of how he had been fined for several misdemeanors. Of how he had not contributed to the little league programs. Of how he had not taken part in any of the various community health and sports programs.

They had told him then, in wrath, that he was nothing but a dirty slob, and the wheels of justice had moved with sure and swift precision. And finally he had stood and stared up at the high and mighty man who had pronounced his doom. Although he could not recall that he had heard the doom. There had been a blackness and that was all that he could remember until he had awakened into a continuation of the blackness and had seen two balloon-like faces leaning over him.

HE had been apprehended and judged and sentenced within a few short hours. And it was all for the good of men—to prove to other men that they could not get away with the flouting of the law which said that one must maintain his fitness and his health. For one's health, said the law, was the most precious thing one had and it was criminal to endanger it or waste it. The national health must be viewed as a vital natural resource and, once again, it was criminal to endanger it or waste it.

So he had been made into a horrible example and the story of what had happened to him would have appeared on the front pages of every paper that was published and the populace thus would be admonished that they must obey, that the health laws were not namby-pamby laws.

He squatted by the water's edge and stared off across the swamp and behind him he heard the muted sounds which came from that huddled camp just a short ways down the island—the clang of the skillet or the pot, the thudding of an axe as someone chopped up firewood, the rustle of the breeze that flapped a piece of canvas stretched as a door across a hut, the quiet murmur of voices in low and resigned talks.

The swamp had a deadly look about it—and it waited. Confident and assured, certain that no one could cross it. All its traps were set and all its nets were spread and it had a patience that no man could match.

Perhaps, he thought, it did not really wait. Maybe it was just a little silly to imagine that it waited. Rather, perhaps, it was simply an entity that did not care. A human life to it was nothing. To it a human life was no more precious than a snake's

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life, or the life of a dragonfly, or of a tiny fish. It would not help and it would not warn and it had no kindness.

He shivered, thinking of this great uncaring. An uncaring that was even worse than if it waited with malignant forethought. For if it waited, at least it was aware of you. At least it paid you the compliment of some slight importance.

Even in the heat of the day, he felt the slimy coldness of the swamp reaching out for him and he shrank back from it, knowing as he did that he could not face it. Despite all the brave words he had mouthed, all his resolution, he would not dare to face it. It was too big for a man to fight—it was too green and greedy.

He hunkered in upon himself, trying to compress himself into a ball of comfort, although he was aware that there was no comfort. There never would be comfort, for now he'd failed himself.

In a little while, he thought, he'd have to get up from where he crouched and go down to the huts. And once he went down there, he knew he would be lost, that he would become one with those others who likewise could not face the swamp. He would live out his life there, fishing for some food, chopping a little wood, caring for the sick, and sitting listless in the sun.

He felt a flare of anger at the system which would sentence a man to such a life as that and he cursed the robots, knowing as he cursed that they were not the ones who were responsible. The robots were a symbol only of the health law situation.

They had been made the physicians and the surgeons to the human race because they were quick as well as steady, because their judgment was unfrayed by any flicker of emotion, because they were as dedicated as the best of human doctors ever had been, because they were tireless and unthinking of themselves.

And that was well and good. But the human race, as it always did, had gone overboard. It had made the robot not only the good and faithful doctor, but it had made him guardian and czar of human health, and in doing this had concocted a metallic ogre.

WOULD there ever be a day, he wondered, when humans would be done for good and all with its goblins and its ogres?

The anger faded out and he crouched dispirited and afraid and all alone beside the black waters of the swamp.

A coward, he told himself. And there was a bitter taste inside his brain and a weakness in his belly.

Get up, he told himself. Get

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up and go down to the huts.

But he didn't. He stayed, as if there might be some sort of reprieve, as if he might be hoping that from some unknown and unprobed source he might dredge up the necessary courage to walk into the swamp.

But the hope, he knew, was a hollow hope.

He had come to the end of hope. Ten years ago he could have done it. But not now. He'd lost too much along the way.

He heard the footsteps behind him and threw a look across his shoulders.

It was Kitty.

She squatted down beside him.

"Eric is getting the stuff together," she told him. "He'll be along in a little while."

"The stuff?"

"Food. A couple of machetes. Some rope."

"But I don't understand."

"He was just waiting for someone who had the guts to tackle it. He figures that you have. He always said one man didn't have a chance, but maybe two men had. Two men, helping one another, just might have a chance."

"But he told me . . ."

"Sure. I know what he told you. What I told you, too. And even in the face of that, you never wavered. That is how we knew."

"We?"

"Of course," said Kitty. "The three of us. I am going, too."

* * *

It took the swamp four days to beat the first of them.

Curiously, it was Eric, the youngest and the strongest.

He stumbled as they walked along a narrow ridge of land, flanked by tangled brush on one hand, by a morass on the other.

Alden, who was following, helped him to his feet, but he could not stand. He staggered for a step or two, then collapsed again.

"Just a little rest," Eric panted. "Just a little rest and then I'll be able to go on."

He crawled, with Alden helping, to a patch of shade, lay flat upon his back, a limp figure of a man.

Kitty sat beside him and stroked his hair back from his forehead.

"Maybe you should build a fire," she said to Alden. "Something hot may help him. All of us could use a bit of something."

Alden turned off the ridge and plunged into the brush. The footing was soft and soggy and in places he sank in muck half way to his knees.

He found a small dead tree and pulled branches off it. The fire, he knew, must be small, and of wood that was entirely dry, for any sign of smoke might alert the patrol that flew above the swamp.

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Back on the ridge again, he used a machete to slice some shavings off a piece of wood and stacked it all with care. It must start on one match, for they had few matches.

Kitty came and knelt beside him, watching.

"Eric is asleep," she said. "And it's not just tuckered out. I think he has a fever."

"It's the middle of the afternoon," said Alden. "We'll stay here until morning. He may feel better, then. Some extra rest may put him on his feet."

"And if it doesn't?"

"We'll stay another day," he said. "The three of us together. That's what we said back there. We would stick together."

She put out a hand and laid it on his arm.

"I was sure you'd say that," she said. "Eric was so sure and he was so right. He said you were the man he had been waiting for."

Alden shook his head. "It's not only Eric," he declared. "It's not only us. It's those others back there. Remember how they helped us? They gave us food, even when it meant they might go a bit more hungry. They gave us two fishhooks out of the six they had. One of them copied the map that Doc had carried. They fixed up a pair of shoes for me because they said I wasn't used to going without shoes. And they all came to see us off and watched until we were out of sight."

He paused and looked at her.

"It's not just us," he said. "It's all of us . all of us in Limbo."

She put up a hand and brushed the hair out of her eyes.

"Did anyone," he asked her, "ever tell you that you are beautiful?"

She made a grimace. "Long ago," she said. "But not for years. Life had been too hard. But once, I guess, you could have said that I was beautiful."

She made a fluttery motion with her hands. "Light the fire," she told him. "Then go and catch some fish. Laying over this way, we'll need the food."

* * *

ALDEN woke at the first faint edge of dawn and lay staring out across the inky water that looked, in the first flush of day, like a floor of black enamel that had just been painted and had not dried as yet, with the shine of wetness showing here and there. A great awkward bird launched itself off a dead tree stub and flapped ungracefully down to skim above the water so that little ripples ran in the black enamel.

Stiffly, Alden sat up. His bones ached from the dampness and he was stiff with the chill of night.

A short distance away, Kitty lay curled into a ball, still sleep-

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ing. He glanced toward the spot where Eric had been sleeping when he himself had gone to bed, and there was no one there.

Startled, he leaped to his feet.

"Eric!" he called.

There was no answer.

"Eric!" he shouted again.

Kitty uncoiled and sat up.

"He's gone," said Alden. "I just woke up and he wasn't there."

He walked over to where the man had been lying and the imprint of his body still was in the grass.

He bent to examine the ground and brushed his hand across it. Some of the blades of grass yielded to his touch; they were beginning to spring back, to stand erect again. Eric, he knew, had not left just a little while ago. He had been gone—for how long, for an hour, for two hours or more?

Kitty rose and came to stand beside him.

Alden got to his feet and faced her.

"He was sleeping when I looked at him before I went to sleep," he said. "Muttering in his sleep, but sleeping. He still had a fever."

"Maybe," she said, "one of us should have sat up to watch him. But he seemed to be all right. And we were all tired."

Alden looked up and down the ridge. There was nothing to be seen, no sign of the missing man.

"He might have wandered off," he said. "Woke up, delirious. He might just have taken off."

And if that were the situation, they might never find him. He might have fallen into a pool of water, or become trapped in muck or quicksand. He might be lying somewhere, exhausted with his effort, very quietly dying.

Alden walked off the ridge into the heavy brush that grew out of the muck. Carefully, he scouted up and down the ridge and there was no sign that anyone, except himself the afternoon before, had come off the ridge. And there would have been some sign, for when one stepped into the muck, he went in to his ankles, in places halfway to his knees.

Mosquitoes and other insects buzzed about him maddeningly as he floundered through the brush and somewhere far off a bird was making chunking sounds.

He stopped to rest and regain his breath, waving his hands about his face to clear the air of insects.

The chunking still kept on and now there was another sound. He listened for the second sound to be repeated.

"Alden," came the cry again, so faint he barely heard it.

He plunged out of the brush back onto the ridge. The cry had come from the way that they had traveled on the day before.

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"Alden!" And now he knew that it was Kitty, and not Eric, calling.

Awkwardly, he galloped down the ridge toward the sound.

KITTY was crouched at the edge of a thirty-foot stretch of open water, where the ridge had broken and let the water in.

He stopped beside her and looked down. She was pointing at a footprint—a footprint heading the wrong way. It lay beside other footprints heading in the opposite direction, the footprints that they had made in the mud as they came along the ridge the day before.

"We didn't stop," said Kitty. "We kept right on. That can't be one of ours. You weren't down here, were you?"

He shook his head.

"Then it must be Eric."

"You stay here," he said.

He plunged into the water and waded across and on the other edge the tracks were going out—tracks heading back the way that they had come.

He stopped and shouted.

"Eric! Eric! Eric!"

He waited for an answer. There was nothing.

A mile farther on, he came to the great morass they had crossed the day before—the mile or more of muck and water that had eaten at their strength. And here, on the muddy edge, the tracks went into the sea of sucking mud and water and disappeared from sight.

He crouched on the shore and peered across the water, interspersed by hummocks that were poison green in the early light. There was no sign of life or movement. Once a fish (perhaps not a fish, perhaps only something) broke the water for an instant, sending out a circle of ripples. But that was all there was.

Heavily, he turned back.

Kitty still crouched beside the water's edge.

He shook his head at her.

"He went back," he said. "I don't see how he could have. He was weak and . . ."

"Determination," Kitty said. "And, perhaps, devotion, too."

"Devotion?"

"Don't you see," she said. "He knew that he was sick. He knew he couldn't make it. And he knew that we'd stay with him."

"But that's what we all agreed," said Alden.

Kitty shook her head. "He wouldn't have it that way. He is giving us a chance."

"No!" yelled Alden. "I won't let him do it. I'm going back and find him."

"Across that last stretch of swamp?" asked Kitty.

Alden nodded. "Probably he was just able to make it. He more than likely is holed up the other side somewhere."

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"And what if he didn't make it? What if he never got across?"

"Then I won't find him, of course. But I have to try."

"What I'm worried about," said Kitty, "is what you'd do if you did find him. What would you do about him? What would you say to him?"

"I'd bring him back," said Alden, "or I'd stay with him."

She lifted her face and tears were standing in her eyes. "You'd give him back his gift," she said. "You'd throw it in his face. You'd make this last great gesture of his mean absolutely nothing."

She looked at Alden. "You could do that?" she asked. "He has done a fine and decent thing. Thinking, perhaps, that it's the last chance he'll have for decency. And you wouldn't let him keep it?"

Alden shook his head.

"He'd do as much for you," she said. "He'd let you keep that final decency."

* * *

ON the morning of the eighth day, Kitty moaned and tossed with fever. The day before had been a sunlit nightmare of mud and saw grass, of terrible heat, of snakes and mosquitoes, of waning hope and a mounting fear that stirred sluggishly in the middle of one's gut.

It had been crazy for them to try it, Alden thought, crazy from the very start—three people who had no right to try it, too out of condition, too ill-equipped, and in his case, at least, too old to try a thing like this. To cross forty miles of swamp took youth and strength, and all that any of the three of them had to qualify had been determination. Perhaps, he thought, a misplaced determination, each of them driven by something which, more than likely, they did not understand.

Why, he wondered, had Kitty and Eric wished to escape from Limbo?

It was something they had never talked about. Although perhaps they would have if there had been a lot of talk. But there had never been. There had been no time or breath for talk.

For, he realized now, there was no real escape. You could escape the swamp, but you could not flee from Limbo. For you became a part of Limbo. Once in Limbo and there was no place left for you in the outside world.

Had it been a gesture only, he wondered—a gesture of difiance. Like that foolish, noble gesture of Eric's in leaving them when he had fallen ill.

And the question of their decision back there came to haunt him once again.

All he had to do, even in the glare of noonday sun, was to shut his eyes and see it all again—a starving, helpless, dying man

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who had crawled off the path and hidden in a clump of tangled underbrush so he could not be found even if one, or both, of his companions should come seeking him. There were flies crawling on his face and he dare not (or could not?) raise a hand to brush them off. There was a gaunt, black bird sitting on a dead tree, stub, waiting patiently, and there was an alligator that lay in the water watching and there were many crawling, creeping, hopping creatures swarming in the grass and in the stunted brush.

The vision never changed; it was a fixed and terrible vision painted in a single stroke by imagination, which then had walked away and let it stand in all its garish detail.

Now it was Kitty, lying there and moaning through clenched teeth—an old and useless woman as he was an old and useless man. Kitty, with her lined face and her straggly hair and the terrible gauntness of her, but still possessed of that haunting sense of eternal youth somehow trapped tight inside her body.

HE should go, he thought, and get some water. Bathe her face and arms with it, force some down her throat. But the water was scarcely fit to drink. It was old and stagnant and it stank of rotted vegetation and it had the taste of ancient dead things one tried hard not to visualize.

He went over to the small pack that belonged to Kitty and from it he took the battered and fire-blackened sauce pan that was the one utensil they had brought along.

Picking his way carefully down the tiny island on which they'd spent the night, he approached the water's edge and scouted watchfully along it, seeking for a place where the water might appear a bit less poisonous. Although that, he knew, was foolishness; the water was the same no matter where one looked.

It was bitter water in a bitter swamp that had fought them for seven days, that had sought to trap them and had tried to hold them back, that had bit and stung them and tried to drive them crazy, that had waited, knowing there would come a slip or some misstep or fall that would put them at its mercy.

He shivered, thinking of it. This was the first time, he realized, that he had thought of it. He had never thought of it before; he had merely fought it. All his energy had been directed toward getting over that yard of ground ahead, and after that, another yard of ground.

Time had lost its meaning, measured only in a man's endurance. Distance had come to have no significance, for it stretched on every side. There would al-

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ways be that distance; there would be no end to it.

It had been a murderous seven days and the first two of them he had known he could not make it, that there was not another day left in him. But each day there had been another day left in him and he'd made each day to its bitter end.

Of the three of them, he thought, he was the only one who still was on his feet. And another funny thing: He knew now that he had another day left in him, that he had many other days left in him. He could keep on forever, if it took forever. Now the swamp could never stop him. Somewhere in that terrible, tangled greenness he had found a hidden strength and had gotten second wind.

Why should this be, he wondered. What was that inner strength? From what source had it come?

Was it, perhaps, because his purpose had been strong?

And once again he stood at the window, wondering if there'd be a butterfly this time or if the butterfly were only a certain part of childhood. But never questioning for a moment that the magic still was there, that it had been so strong and shining that thirty years could not have tarnished it.

So he had gone outside and had sat beneath the tree as he had sat that day when he was a child, with his hands held out, palms up, and the strange card laid across one palm. He could feel the edge of magic and could smell the new freshness of the air, but it was not right, for there were no yellow leaves falling down the sky.

HE had waited for the frost and when it came had gone out again and sat beneath the tree with the leaves falling through the air like slow-paced drops of rain. He had closed his eyes and had smelled the autumn air tainted with the faintest touch of smoke, and had felt the sunlight falling warm about him and it was exactly as it had been that day so long ago. The autumn day of boyhood had not been lost; it was with him still.

He had sat there with his hands held out and with the card across one palm and nothing happened. Then, as it had failed to do that day of long ago, a leaf came fluttering down and fell atop the card. It lay there for an instant, a perfect goldenness.

Then suddenly it was gone and in its place atop the card was the object that had been printed on the card—a ball of some sort, three inches in diameter, and with prickly spikes sticking out over it, like an outsize gooseberry. Then it buzzed at him and he could feel the buzzing spreading through his body.

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It seemed in that instant that there was something with him, or that he was part of something —some thinking, living, (perhaps even loving) thing that quivered somewhere very close to him and yet very far away. As if this thing, whatever it might be, had reached out a finger and had touched him, for no other purpose than to let him know that it was there.

He crouched down to dip the water with the battered, blackened pan from a pool that appeared to be just a little cleaner and a little clearer than it had seemed elsewhere.

And there had been something there, he thought. Something that through the years he had become acquainted with, but never truly known. A gentle thing, for it had dealt with him gently. And a thing that had a purpose and had driven him toward that purpose, but kindly, as a kindly teacher drives a student toward a purpose that in the end turns out to be the student's own.

The little buzzing gooseberry was the gateway to it, so long as the gooseberry had been needed. Although, he thought, such a word as gateway was entirely wrong, for there had been no gateway in the sense that he had ever seen this thing, or come close to it or had a chance to find out what it was. Only that it was, that it lived and that it had a mind and could communicate.

Not talk—communicate. And toward the end, he recalled, the communication had been excellent, although the understanding that should have gone with communication had never quite come clear.

Given time, he thought. But there had been an interruption and that was why he must get back, as quickly as he could. For it would not know why he had left it. It would not understand. It might think that he had died, if it had a concept that would encompass a condition such as death. Or that he had deserted it. Or that somehow it had failed.

He dipped the sauce pan full of water and straightened, standing in the great hush of the morning.

He remembered now. But why had he not remembered sooner? Why had it escaped him? How had he forgotten?

From far away he heard it and hearing it, felt the hope leap in him. He waited tensely to hear it once again, needing to hear it that second time to know that it was true.

It came again, faint, but carrying unmistakably in the morning air—the crowing of a rooster.

He swung around and ran back to the camping site.

Running, he stumbled, and the pan flew from his hand. He scrabbled to his feet and left the pan where it had fallen.

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He rushed to Kitty and fell on his knees beside her.

"Just a few more miles!" he shouted. "I heard a rooster crowing. The edge of the swamp can't be far away."

He reached down and slid his hands beneath her, lifted her, cradling her, holding her tightly against him.

She moaned and tossed.

"Easy, girl," he said. "We're almost out of it."

He struggled from his knees and stood erect. He shifted her body so that it rode the easier in his arms.

"I'll carry you," he said. "I can carry you all the way."

* * *

IT was farther that he'd thought. And the swamp was worse that it had ever been—as if, sensing that this stumbling, stubborn creature might slip out of its grasp, it had redoubled its trickery and its viciousness in a last attempt to seize and swallow him.

He had left the little food they'd had behind. He'd left everything behind. He had taken only Kitty.

When she achieved a sort of half consciousness and cried for water, he stopped beside a pool, carried water to her in his cupped hands, bathed her face and helped her drink, then went on again.

Late in the afternoon the fever broke and she regained full consciousness.

"Where am I?" she asked, staring at the green-blackness of the swamp.

"Who are you?" she asked, and he tried to tell her. She did not remember him, or the swamp, or Limbo. He spoke to her of Eric and she did not remember Eric.

And that, he recalled, had been the way it had been with him. He had not remembered. Only over hours and days had it come back to him in snatches.

Was that the way it would be with her? Had that been the way it had been with Eric? Had there been no self-sacrifice, no heroism in what Eric did? Had it been a mere, blind running from the pit of horror in which he awoke to find himself?

And if all of this were true, whatever had been wrong with him, whatever caused the fever and forgetfulness, was then the same as had happened to Kitty and to Eric.

Was it, he wondered, some infection that he carried?

For if that were true, then it was possible he had infected everyone in Limbo.

He went on into the afternoon and his strength amazed him, for he should not be this strong.

It was nerve, he knew, that kept him going, the sheer excitement of being almost free of this vindictive swamp.

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But the nerve would break, he knew. He could not keep it up. The nerve would break and the excitement would grow dull and dim and the strength would drain from him. He'd then be an aged man carrying an aged woman through a swamp he had no right to think he could face alone, let alone assume the burden of another human.

But the strength held out. He could feel it flowing in him. Dusk fell and the first faint stars came out, but the going now was easier. It had been easier, he realized, for the last hour or so.

"Put me down," said Kitty. "I can walk. There's no need to carry me."

"Just a little while," said Alden. "We are almost there."

Now the ground was firmer and he could tell by the rasp of it against his trouser legs that he was walking in a different kind of grass—no longer the harsh, coarse, knife-like grass that grew in the swamp, but a softer, gentle grass.

A hill loomed in the darkness and he climbed it and now the ground was solid.

He reached the top of the hill and stopped. He let Kitty down and stood her on her feet.

The air was clean and sharp and pure. The leaves of a nearby tree rustled in a breeze and in the east the sky was tinged with the pearly light of a moon.

Back of them the swamp, which they had beaten, and in front of them the clean, solid countryside that eventually would defeat them. Although eventually, Alden told himself, sounded much too long. In a few days, perhaps in a few hours, they would be detected and run down.

With an arm around Kitty's waist to hold her steady as she walked, he went down the hill to eventual defeat.

* * *

THE rattletrap pickup truck stood in the moonlit farmyard. There were no lights in the house that stood gaunt upon the hilltop. The road from the farmyard ran down a long, steep hill to join the main road a half mile or so away.

There would be no ignition key, of course, but one could cross the wires, then shove the truck until it started coasting down the hill. Once it was going, throw it into gear and the motor would crank over and start up.

"Someone will catch us, Alden," Kitty told him. "There is no more certain way for someone to find out about us. Stealing a truck . . ."

"It's only twenty miles," said Alden. "That's what the signpost said. And we can be there before there is too much fuss."

"But it would be safer walking and hiding."

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"There is no time," he said.

For he remembered now. It had all come back to him—the machine that he had built in the dining room. A machine that was like a second body, that was like a suit to wear. It was a two-way schoolhouse, or maybe a two-way laboratory, for when he was inside of it he learned of that other life and it learned of him.

It had taken years to build it, years to understand how to assemble the components had those others, or that other, had provided. All the components had been small and there had been thousands of them. He had held out his hand and thought hard of yellow leaves falling in the blue haze of autumn air and there had been another piece of that strange machine put into his hand.

And now it stood, untenant, in that faded, dusky room and they would be wondering what had happened to him.

"Come on," he said to Kitty, sharply. "There is no use in waiting."

"There might be a dog. There might be a . . ."

"We will have to chance it."

He ducked out of the clump of trees and ran swiftly across the moonlit barnyard to the truck. He reached it and wrenched at the hood and the hood would not come up.

Kitty screamed, just once, more a warning scream than fright, and he spun around. The shape stood not more than a dozen feet away, with the moonlight glinting off its metal and the Medic Disciplinary symbol engraved upon its chest.

Alden backed against the truck and stood there, staring at the robot knowing that the truck had been no more than bait. And thinking how well the medics must know the human race to set that sort of trap—knowing not only the working of the human body, but the human mind as well.

Kitty said: "If you'd not been slowed up. If you'd not carried me . . ."

"It would have made no difference," Alden told her. "They probably had us spotted almost from the first and were tracking us."

"Young man," the robot said, "you are entirely right. I have been waiting for you. I must admit," the robot said, "that I have some admiration for you. You are the only ones who ever crossed the swamp. There were some who tried, but they never made it."

So this was how it ended, Alden told himself, with some bitterness, but not as much, perhaps, as he should have felt. For there had been, he thought, nothing but a feeble hope from the

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first beginning. He had been walking toward defeat, he knew, with every step he'd taken—and into a hopelessness that even he admitted.

If only he had been able to reach the house in Willow Bend, that much he had hoped for, that much would have satisfied him. To reach it and let those others know he had not deserted.

"So what happens now?" he asked the robot. "Is it back to Limbo?"

The robot never had a chance to answer. There was a sudden rush of running feet, pounding across the farmyard.

The robot swung around and there was something streaking in the moonlight that the robot tried to duck, but couldn't.

Alden sprang in a low and powerful dive, aiming for the robot's knees. His shoulder struck on metal and the flying rock clanged against the breastplate of the metal man. Alden felt the robot, already thrown off balance by the rock, topple at the impact of his shoulder.

The robot crashed heavily to the earth and Alden, sprawling on the ground, fought upright to his feet.

"Kitty!" he shouted.

But Kitty, he saw, was busy.

She was kneeling beside the fallen robot, who was struggling to get up and in her hand she held the thrown rock, with her hand raised above the robot's skull. The rock came down and the skull rang like a bell—and rang again and yet again.

The robot ceased its struggling and lay still, but Kitty kept on pounding at the skull.

"Kitty, that's enough," said another voice.

Alden turned to face the voice.

"Eric!" he cried. "But we left you back there."

"I know," said Eric. "You thought I had run back to Limbo. I found where you had tracked me."

"But you are here. You threw the rock."

Eric shrugged. "I got to be myself again. At first I didn't know where I was or who I was or anything at all. And then I remembered all of it. I had to make a choice then. There really wasn't any choice. There was *nothing* back in Limbo. I tried to catch up with you, but you moved too fast."

"I killed him," Kitty announced, defiantly. "I don't care. I meant to kill him."

"Not killed," said Eric. "There'll be others coming soon. He can be repaired."

"Give me a hand with the hood on this truck," said Alden. "We have to get out of here."

* * *

ERIC parked the rattletrap back of the house and Alden got out.

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"Come along now," he said.

The back door was unlocked, just as he had left it. He went into the kitchen and switched on the ceiling light.

Through the door that opened into the dining room, he could see the shadowy framework of the structure he had built.

"We can't stay here too long," said Eric. "They know we have the truck. More than likely they'll guess where we were headed."

Alden did not answer. For there was no answer. There was no place they could go.

Wherever they might go, they would be hunted down, for no one could be allowed to flaunt the medic statutes and defy the medic justice. There was no one in the world who would dare to help them.

He had run from Limbo to reach this place—although he had not known at the time what he was running to. It was not Limbo he had run from; rather, he had run to reach the machine that stood in the dining room just beyond this kitchen.

He went into the room and snapped on the light and the strange mechanism stood glittering in the center of the room.

It was a man-size cage and there was just room for him to stand inside of it. And he must let them know that he was back again.

He stepped into the space that had been meant to hold him and the outer framework and its mysterious attachments seemed to fold themselves about him.

He stood in the proper place and shut his eyes and thought of falling yellow leaves. He made himself into the boy again who had sat beneath the tree and it was not his mind, but the little boy mind that sensed the goldenness and blue, that smelled the wine of autumn air and the warmth of autumn sun.

He wrapped himself in autumn and the long ago and he waited for the answer, but there was no answer.

He waited and the goldenness slid from him and the air was no longer wine-like and there was no warm sunlight, but a biting wind that blew off some black sea of utter nothingness.

He knew—he knew and yet he'd not admit it. He stood stubbornly and wan, with his feet still in the proper place and waited.

But even stubborness worn thin and he knew that they were gone and that there was no use of waiting, for they would not be back. Slowly he turned and walked out of the cage.

He had been away too long.

As he stepped out of the cage, he saw the vial upon the floor and stooped to pick it up. He had supped from it, he remembered, that day (how long ago?) when he had stepped back into the

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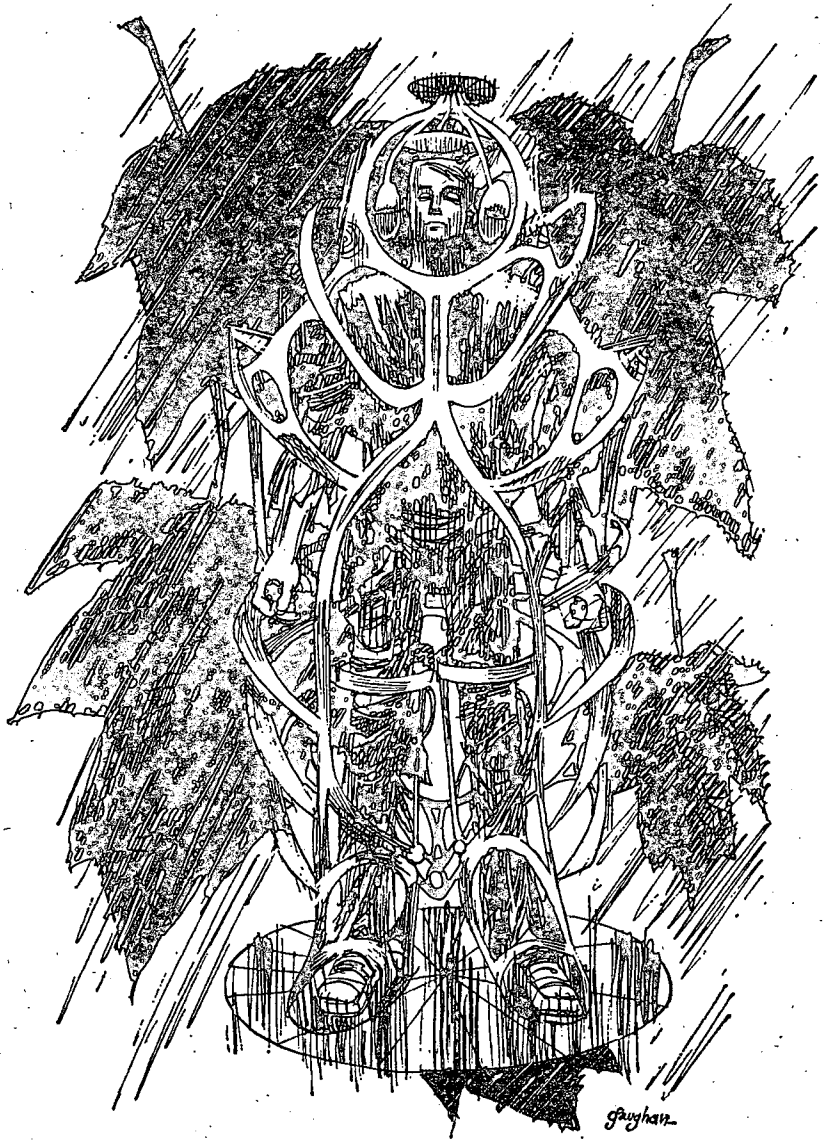

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room after long hours in the cage.

They had materialized it for him and they'd told him he should drink it and he could remember the bitter taste it had left upon his tongue.

Kitty and Eric were standing in the doorway, staring at him, and he looked up from the vial and stared in their direction.

"Alden," Kitty asked, "what has happened to you?"

He shook his head at her. "It's all right," he told her. "Nothing's happened. They just aren't there, is all."

"Something happened," she said. "You look younger by twenty years or more."

HE let the vial fall from his hand. He lifted his hands in front of him and in the light from overhead, he saw that the wrinkles in the skin had disappeared. They were stronger, firmer hands. They were younger hands.

"It's your face," Kitty said. "It's all filled out. The crow's feet all are gone."

He rubbed his palm along his jaw and it seemed to him that the bone was less pronounced, that the flesh had grown out to pad it.

"The fever," he said. "That was it—the fever."

For he remembered dimly. Not remembered, maybe, for perhaps he had never known. But he was knowing now. That was the way it had always worked. Not as if he'd learned a thing, but as if he'd remembered it. They put a thing into his mind and left it planted there and it unfolded then and crept upon him slowly.

And now he knew.

The cage was not a teacher. It was a device they had used to study man, to learn about his body and his metabolism and all the rest of it.

And then when they had known all there need be known, they had written the prescription and given it to him.

Young man, the robot in the barnyard had said to him. But he had not noticed. Young man, but he had too many other things to think about to notice those two words.

But the robot had been wrong.

For it was not only young.

Not young alone—not young for the sake of being young, but young because there was coursing in his body a strange alien virus, or whatever it might be, that had set his body right, that had tuned it up again, that had given it the power to replace old and aging tissue with new.

Doctors to the universe, he thought, that is what they were. Mechanics sent out to tinker up and renovate and put in shape the protoplasmic machinery that was running old and rusty.

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"The fever?" Eric asked him.

"Yes," said Alden. "And thank God, it's contagious. You both caught it from me."

He looked closely at them and there was no sign of it as yet, although Eric, it seemed, had begun to change. And Kitty, he thought, when it starts to work on her, how beautiful she'll be! Beautiful because she had never lost a certain part of beauty that still showed through the age.

And all the people here in Willow Bend—they, too, had been exposed, as had the people who were condemned to Limbo. And perhaps the judge as well, the high and mighty face that had loomed so high above him. In a little while the fever and the healthy youthfulness would seep across the world.

"We can't stay here," said Eric. "The medics will be coming."

Alden shook his head. "We don't need to run," he said. "They can't hurt us now."

For the medic rule was ended. There was now no need of medics, no need of little leagues, no need of health programs.

It would take a while, of course, for the people to realize what had happened to them, but the day would come when they would know for sure and then the medics could be broken down for scrap or used for other work.

He felt stronger than he'd ever felt. Strong enough, if need be, to walk back across the swamp to Limbo.

"We'd not got out of Limbo," Kitty told him, "if it hadn't been for you. You were just crazy enough to supply the guts we needed."

"Please remember that," said Alden, "in a few more days, when you are young again."

THE END

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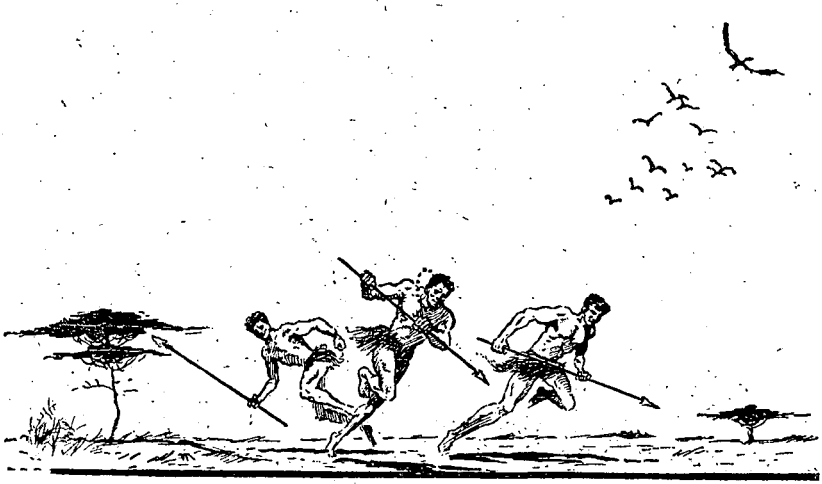
A QUESTION OF RE-ENTRY

By J. G. BALLARD

Illustrator ADKINS

Somewhere in the festering blackness of the Amazon jungle the Moonship had crashed. And the only ones who might know the truth of the pilot's fate were a white witch doctor and his tribe of Indian worshippers.



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ALL day they had moved steadily upstream, occasionally pausing to raise the propeller and cut away the knots of weed, and by 3 o'clock had covered some sevenyt-five miles. Fifty yards away, on either side of the patrol launch, the high walls of the jungle river rose over the water, the unbroken massif of the mato grosso which swept across the Amazonas from Campos Buros to the delta of the Orinoco. Despite their progress —they had set off from the telegraph sation at Tres Buritis at 7 o'clock that morning—the river showed no inclination to narrow or alter its volume. Sombre and unchanging, the forest followed its course, the aerial canopy shutting off the sunlight and cloaking the water along the banks with a black velvet sheen. Now and then the channel would widen into a flat expanse of what appeared to be stationary water, the slow oily swells which dis-

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turbed its surface transforming it into a huge sluggish mirror of the distant, enigmatic sky, the islands of rotten balsa logs refracted by the layers of haze like the drifting archipelagoes of a dream. Then the channel would narrow again and the cooling jungle darkness enveloped the launch.

Although for the first few hours Connolly had joined Captain Pereira at the rail, he had become bored with the endless green banks of the forest sliding past them, and since noon had remained in the cabin, pretending to study the trajectory maps. The time might pass more slowly there, but at least it was cooler and less depressing. The fan hummed and pivoted, and the clicking of the cutwater and the whispering plant of the current past the gliding hull soothed the slight headache induced by the tepid beer he and Pereira had shared after lunch.

THIS first encounter with the jungle had disappointed Connolly. His previous experience had been confined to the Dredging Project at Lake Maracaibo, where the only forests consisted of the abandoned oil rigs built out into the water. Their rusting hulks, and the huge draglines and pontoons of the dredging teams, were fauna of a man-made species. In the Amazonian jungle he had expected to see the full variety of nature in its richest and most colorful outpouring, but instead it was nothing more than a moribund tree-level swamp, unweeded and overgrown, the whole thing more dead than alive, an example of bad husbandry on a continental scale. The margins of the river were rarely well defined; except where enough rotting trunks had gathered to form a firm parapet, there were no formal banks, and the shallows ran off among the undergrowth for a hundred yards, irrigating huge areas of vegetation that were already drowning in moisture.

Connolly had tried to convey his disenchantment to Pereira, who now sat under the awning on the deck, placidly smoking a cheroot, partly to repay the Captain for his polite contempt for Connolly and everything his mission implied. Like all the officers of the Native Protection Missions whom Connolly had met, first in Venezuela and now in Brazil, Pereira maintained a proprietary outlook towards the jungle and its mystique, which would not be breached by any number of fresh-faced investigators in their crisp drill uniforms. Captain Pereira had not been impressed by the UN flashes on Connolly's shoulders with their orbital monogram, nor by the high-level

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request for assistance cabled to the Mission three weeks earlier from Brasilia. To Pereira, obviously, the office suites in the white towers at the capital were as far away as New York, London or Babylon.

SUPERFICIALLY, the Captain had been helpful enough, supervising the crew as they stowed Connolly's monitoring equipment aboard, checking his Smith & Wesson and exchanging a pair of defective mosquito boots. As long as Connolly had wanted to, he had conversed away amiably, pointing out this and that feature of the landscape, identifying an unusual bird or lizard on an overhead bough.

But his indifference to the real object of the mission—he had given a barely perceptible nod when Connolly described it—soon became obvious. It was this neutrality which irked Connolly, implying that Pereira spent all his time ferrying UN investigators up and down the rivers after their confounded lost space capsule like so many tourists in search of some non-existent El Dorado. Above all there was the suggestion that Connolly and the hundreds of other investigators deployed around the continent were being too persistent. When all was said and done, Pereira implied, five years had elapsed since the returning lunar spacecraft, the *Goliath 7*, had plummeted into the South American land mass, and to prolong the search indefinitely was simply bad form, even, perhaps, necrophilic. There was not the faintest chance of the pilot still being alive, so he should be decently forgotten, given a statue outside a railway station or airport car park and left to the pigeons.

Connolly would have been glad to explain the reasons for the indefinite duration of the search, the overwhelming moral reasons, apart from the political and technical ones. He would have liked to point out that the lost astronaut, Colonel Francis Spender, by accepting the immense risks of the flight to and from the Moon, was owed the absolute discharge of any assistance that could be given him. He would have liked to remind Pereira that the successful landing on the Moon, after some half-dozen fatal attempts—at least three of the luckless pilots were still orbiting the Moon in their dead ships—was the culmination of an age-old ambition with profound psychological implications for mankind, and that the failure to find the astronaut after his return might induce unassagueable feelings of guilt and inadequacy. (If the sea was an unconscious symbol of the unconscious, was space perhaps an image of total unfet-

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tered time, and the inability to penetrate it a tragic exile to one of the limbos of eternity, a symbolic death in life?)

But Captain Pereira was not interested. Calmly inhaling the scented aroma of his cheroot, he sat imperturbably at the rail, surveying the fetid swamps that moved past them.

SHORTLY before noon, when they had covered some 40 miles, Connolly pointed to the remains of a bamboo landing stage elevated on high poles above the bank. A threadbare rope bridge trailed off among the mangroves, and through an embrasure in the forest they could see a small clearing where a clutter of abandoned adobe huts dissolved like refuse heaps in the sunlight.

"Is this one of their camps?"

Pereira shook his head. "The Espirro tribe, closely related to the Nambikwaras. Three years ago one of them carried influenza back from the telegraph station, an epidemic broke out, turned into a form of pulmonary edema, within forty-eight hours three hundred Indians had died. The whole group disintegrated, only about fifteen of the men and their families are still alive. A great tragedy."

They moved forward to the bridge and stood beside the tall Negro helmsman as the two other members of the crew began to shackle sections of fine wire mesh into a cage over the deck. Pereira raised his binoculars and scanned the river ahead.

"Since the Espirros vacated the area the Nambas have begun to forage down this far. We won't see any of them, but it's as well to be on the safe side."

"Do you mean they're hostile?" Connolly asked.

"Not in a conscious sense. But the various groups which comprise the Nambikwaras are permanently feuding with each other, and this far from the settlement we might easily be involved in an opportunist attack. Once we get to the settlement we'll be all right—there's a sort of precarious equilibrium there. But even so, have your wits about you. As you'll see, they're as nervous as birds."

"How does Ryker manage to keep out of their way? Hasn't he been here for years?"

"About twelve." Pereira sat down on the gunwhale and eased his peaked cap off his forehead. "Ryker is something of a special case. Temperamentally he's rather explosive—I meant to warn you to handle him carefully, he might easily whip up an incident—but he seems to have maneuvered himself into a position of authority with the tribe. In some ways he's become an umpire, arbitrating in their various feuds.

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How he does it I haven't discovered yet; it's quite uncharacteristic of the Indians to regard a white man in that way. However, he's useful to us, we might eventually set up a mission here. Though that's next to impossible —we tried it once and the Indians just moved 500 miles away."

CONNOLLY looked back at the derelict landing stage as it disappeared around a bend, barely distinguishable from the jungle, which was as dilapidated as this sole mournful artifact.

"What on earth made Ryker come out here?" He had heard something in Brasilia of this strange figure, sometime journalist and man of action, the self-proclaimed world citizen who at the age of forty-two, after a life spent venting his spleen on civilization and its gimcrack gods, had suddenly disappeared into the Amazonas and taken up residence with one of the aborginial tribes. Most latter-day Gauguins were absconding con-men or neurotics, but Ryker seemed to be a genuine character in his own right, the last of a race of true individualists retreating before the barbed-wire fences and regimentation of 20th century life. But his chosen paradise seemed pretty scruffy and degenerate, Connolly reflected, when one saw it at close quarters. However, as long as the man could organize the Indians into a few search parties he would serve his purpose. "I can't understand why Ryker should pick the Amazon basin. The South Pacific, yes, but from all I've heard—and you've confirmed just now—the Indians appear to be a pretty diseased and miserable lot, hardly the noble savage."

Captain Pereira shrugged, looking away across the oily water, his plump sallow face mottled by the lace-like shadow of the wire netting. He belched discretely to himself, and then adjusted his holster belt. "I don't know the South Pacific, but I should guess it's also been oversentimentalized. Ryker didn't come here for a scenic tour. I suppose the Indians are diseased and, yes, reasonably miserable. Within fifty years they'll probably have died out. But for the time being they do represent a certain form of untamed, natural existence, which after all made us what we are. The hazards facing them are immense, and they survive." He gave Connolly a sly smile. "But you must argue it out with Ryker."

They lapsed into silence and sat by the rail, watching the river unfurl itself. Exhausted and collapsing, the great trees crowded the banks, the dying expiring among the living, jostling each other aside as if for a last despairing assault on the patrol

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boat and its passengers. For the next half an hour, until they opened their lunch packs, Connolly searched the tree-tops for the giant bifurcated parachute which should have carried the capsule to earth. Virtually impermeable to the atmosphere, it would still be visible, spreadeagled like an enormous bird over the canopy of leaves. Then, after drinking a can of Pereira's beer, he excused himself and went down to the cabin.

THE two steel cases containing the monitoring equipment had been stowed under the chart table, and he pulled them out and checked that the moisture-proof seals were still intact. The chances of making visual contact with the capsule were infinitessimal, but as long as it was intact it would continue to transmit both a sonar and radio beacon, admittedly over little more than twenty miles, but sufficient to identify its whereabouts to anyone in the immediate neighborhood. However, the entire northern half of the South Americas had been covered by successive aerial sweeps, and it seemed unlikely that the beacons were still operating. The disappearance of the capsule argued that it had sustained at least minor damage, and by now the batteries would have been corroded by the humid air.

Recently certain of the UN Space Department agencies had begun to circulate the unofficial view that Colonel Spender had failed to select the correct attitude for re-entry and that the capsule had been vaporized on its final descent, but Connolly guessed that this was merely an attempt to pacify world opinion and prepare the way for the resumption of the space program. Not only the Lake Maracaibo Dredging Project, but his own presence on the patrol boat, indicated that the Department still believed Colonel Spender to be alive, or at least to have survived the landing. His final re-entry orbit should have brought him down into the landing zone 500 miles to the east of Trinidad, but the last radio contact before the ionization layers around the capsule severed transmission indicated that he had under-shot his trajectory and come down somewhere on the South American land-mass along a line linking Lake Maracaibo with Brasilia.

Footsteps sounded down the companionway, and Captain Pereira lowered himself into the cabin. He tossed his hat onto the chart table and sat with his back to the fan, letting the air blow across his fading hair, carrying across to Connolly a sweet unsavory odor of garlic and cheap pomade.

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"You're a sensible man, Lieutenant. Anyone who stays up on deck is crazy. However," —he indicated Connolly's pallid face and hands, a memento of a long winter in New York— "in a way it's a pity you couldn't have put in some sunbathing. That metropolitan pallor will be quite a curiosity to the Indians." He smiled agreeably, showing the yellowing teeth which made his olive complexion even darker. "You may well be the first white man in the literal sense that the Indians have seen."

"What about Ryker? Isn't he white?"

"Black as a berry now. Almost indistinguishable from the Indians, apart from being 7 feet tall." He pulled over a collection of cardboard boxes at the far end of the seat and began to rumage through them. Inside was a collection of miscellaneous oddments —balls of thread and raw cotton, lumps of wax and resin, urucu paste, tobacco and sead-beads. "These ought to assure them of your good intentions."

CONNOLLY watched as he fastened the boxes together. "How many search parties will they buy? Are you sure you brought enough? I have a fifty-dollar allocation for gifts."

"Good," Pereira said matter-of factly. "We'll get some more beer. Don't worry, you can't buy these people, Lieutenant. You have to rely on their good-will; this rubbish will put them in the right frame of mind to talk."

Connolly smiled dourly. "I'm more keen on getting them off their hunkers and out into the bush. How are you going to organize the search parties?"

"They've already taken place."

"What?" Connolly sat forward. "How did that happen? But they should have waited"—he glanced at the heavy monitoring equipment—"they can't have known what—"

Pereira silenced him with a raised hand. "My dear Lieutenant. Relax, I was speaking figuratively. Can't you understand, these people are nomadic, they spend all their lives continually on the move. They must have covered every square foot of this forest a hundred times in the past five years. There's no need to send them out again. Your only hope is that they may have seen something and then persuade them to talk."

Connolly considered this, as Pereira unwrapped another parcel. "All right, but I may want to do a few patrols. I can't just sit around for three days."

"Naturally. Don't worry, Lieutenant. If your astronaut came down anywhere within 500 miles of here they'll know about it." He unwrapped the parcel and removed a small teak cabinet. The

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front panel was slotted, and lifted to reveal the face of a large ormolu table clock, its gothic hands and numerals below a gilded bell-dome. Captain Pereira compared its time with his wrist-watch. "Good. Running perfectly, it hasn't lost a second in forty-eight hours. This should put us in Ryker's good books."

Connolly shook his head. "Why on earth does he want a clock? I thought the man had turned his back on such things."

Pereira packed the tooled metal face away. "Ah, well, whenever we escape from anything we always carry a memento of it with us. Ryker collects clocks; this is the third I've bought for him. God knows what he does with them."

THE launch had changed course, and was moving in a wide circle across the river, the current whispering in a tender rippling murmur across the hull. They made their way up onto the deck, where the helmsman was unshackling several sections of the wire mesh in order to give himself an uninterrupted view of the bows. The two sailors climbed through the aperture and took up their positions fore and aft, boat-hooks at the ready.

They had entered a large bow-shaped extension of the river, where the current had overflowed the bank and produced a series of low-lying mud-flats. Some two or three hundred yards wide, the water seemed to be almost motionless, seeping away through the trees which defined its margins so that the exit and inlet of the river were barely perceptible. At the inner bend of the bow, on the only firm ground, a small cantonment of huts had been built on a series of wooden palisades jutting out over the water. A narrow promontory of forest reached to either side of the cantonment, but a small area behind it had been cleared to form an open campong. On its far side were a number of wattle storage huts, a few dilapidated shacks and hovels of dried palm.

The entire area seemed deserted, but as they approached, the cutwater throwing up a fine plume of white spray across the glassy swells, a few Indians appeared in the shadows below the creepers trailing over the jetty, watching them stonily. Connolly had expceted to see a group of tall broad-shouldered warriors with white markings notched across their arms and cheeks, but these Indians were puny and degenerate, their pinched faces lowered beneath their squat bony skulls. They seemed undernourished and depressed, eyeing the visitors with a sort of sullen watchfulness like pariah dogs from the gutter.

Pereira was shielding his eyes

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from the sun, across whose inclining path they were now moving, searching the ramshackle bungalow built of woven rattan at the far end of the jetty.

"No signs of Ryker yet. He's probably asleep or drunk." He noticed Connolly's distasteful frown. "Not much of a place, I'm afraid."

AS they moved towards the jetty, the wash from the launch slapping at the greasy bamboo poles and throwing a gust of foul air into their faces, Connolly looked back across the open disc of water, into which the curving wake of the launch was dissolving in a final summary of their long voyage up-river to the derelict settlement, fading into the slack brown water like a last tenuous thread linking him with the order and sanity of civilization. A strange atmosphere of emptiness hung over this inland lagoon, a flat pall of dead air that in a curious way was as menacing as any overt signs of hostility, as if the crudity and violence of all the Amazonian jungles met here in a momentary balance which some untoward movement of his own might upset, unleashing appalling forces. Away in the distance, down-shore, the great trees leaned like corpses into the glazed air, and the haze over the water embalmed the jungle and the late afternoon in a timeless stillness.

They bumped against the jetty, rocking lightly into the palisade of poles and dislodging a couple of water-logged outriggers lashed together. The helmsman reversed the engine, waiting for the sailors to secure the lines. None of the Indians had come forward to assist them. Connolly caught a glimpse of one old simian face regarding him with a rheumy eye, riddled teeth nervously fingering a pouch-like lower lip.

He turned to Pereira, glad that the Captain would be interceding between himself and the Indians. "Captain, I should have asked before, but—are these Indians cannibalistic?"

Pereira shook his head, steadying himself against a staunchion. "Not at all. Don't worry about that, they'd have been extinct years ago if they were."

"Not even—white men?" For some reason Connolly found himself placing a peculiarly indelicate emphasis upon the word 'white'.

Pereira laughed, straightening his uniform jacket. "For God's sake, Lieutenant, no. Are you worrying that your astronaut might have been eaten by them?"

"I suppose it's a possibility."

"I assure you, there have been no recorded cases. As a matter of inetrest, it's a rare practice on this continent. Much more typical of Africa—and Europe,"

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he added with sly humor. Pausing to smile at Connolly, he said quietly. "Don't despise the Indians, Lieutenant. However diseased and dirty they may be, at least they are in equilibrium with their environment. And with themselves. You'll find no Christopher Columbuses or Colonel Spenders here, but no Belsens either. Perhaps one is as much a symptom of unease as the other?"

THEY had begun to drift down the jetty, over-running one of the outriggers, whose bow creaked and disappeared under the stern of the launch, and Pereira shouted at the helmsman: "Ahead, Sancho! More ahead! Damn Ryker, where is the man?"

Churning out a niagara of boiling brown water, the launch moved forward, driving its shoulder into the bamboo supports, and the entire jetty sprung lightly under the impact. As the motor was cut and the lines finally secured, Connolly looked up at the jetty above his head.

Scowling down at him, an expression of bilious irritability on his heavy-jawed face, was a tall bare-chested man wearing a pair of frayed cotton shorts and a sleeve-less waistcoat of pleated raffia, his dark eyes almost hidden by a wide-brimmed straw hat. The heavy muscles of his exposed chest and arms were the color of tropical teak, and the white scars on his lips and the fading traces of the heat ulcers which studded his shin bones provided the only lighter coloring. Standing there, arms akimbo with a sort of jaunty arrogance, he seemed to represent to Connolly that quality of untamed energy which he had so far found so conspicuously missing from the forest.

Completing his scrutiny of Connolly, the big man bellowed: "Pereira, for God's sake, what do you think you're doing? That's my bloody outrigger you've just run down! Tell that steersman of your's to get the cataracts out of his eyes or I'll put a bullet through his backside!"

Grinning good humoredly, Pereira pulled himself up on to the jetty. "My dear Ryker, contain yourself. Remember your blood-pressure." He peered down at the water-logged hulk of the derelict canoe which was now ejecting itself slowly from the river. "Anyway, what good is a canoe to you, you're not going anywhere."

GRUDGINGLY, Ryker shook Pereira's hand. "That's what you like to think, Captain. You and your confounded Mission, you want me to do all the work. Next time you may find I've gone a thousand miles up-river. And taken the Nambas with me."

"What an epic prospect, Ryker.

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You'll need a Homer to celebrate it." Pereira turned and gestured Connolly on to the jetty. The Indians were still hanging about listlessly, like guilty intruders.

Ryker eyed Connolly's uniform suspiciously. "Who's this? Another so-called anthropologist, sniffing about for smut? I warned you last time, I will not have any more of those."

"No, Ryker. Can't you recognize the uniform? Let me introduce Lieutenant Connolly, of that brotherhood of latter-day saints, by whose courtesy and generosity we live in peace together—the United Nations."

"What? Don't tell me they've got a mandate here now? God

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above, I suppose he'll bore my head off about cereal/protein ratios!" His ironic groan revealed a concealed reserve of acid humor.

"Relax. The Lieutenant is very charming and polite. He works for the Space Department, Reclamation Division. You know, searching for lost aircraft and the like. There's a chance you may be able to help him." Pereira winked at Connolly and steered him forward. "Lieutenant, the Rajah Ryker."

"I doubt it," Ryker said dourly. They shook hands, the corded muscles of Ryker's fingers like a trap. Despite his thick-necked stoop, Ryker was a good six to ten inches taller than Connolly. For a moment he held on to Connolly's hand, a slight trace of wariness revealed below his mask of bad temper. "When did this plane come down?" he asked. Connolly guessed that he was already thinking of a profitable salvage operation.

"Some time ago," Pereira said mildly. He picked up the parcel containing the cabinet clock and began to stroll after Ryker towards the bungalow at the end of the jetty. A low-eaved dwelling of woven rattan, its single room was surrounded on all sides by a veranda, the overhanging roof shading it from the sunlight. Creepers trailed across from the surrounding foliage, involving it in the background of palms and fronds, so that the house seemed a momentary formalization of the jungle.

"But the Indians might have heard something about it," Pereira went on. "Five years ago, as a matter of fact."

RYKER snorted. "My God, you've got a hope." They went up the steps on to the veranda, where a slim-shouldered Indian youth, his eyes like moist marbles, was watching from the shadows. With a snap of irritation, Ryker cupped his hand around the youth's pate and propelled him with a backward swing down the steps. Sprawling on his knees, the youth picked himself up, eyes still fixed on Connolly, then emitted what sounded like a high-pitched nasal hoot, compounded partly of fear and partly of excitement. Connolly looked back from the doorway, and noticed that several other Indians had stepped onto the pier and were watching him with the same expression of rapt curiosity.

Pereira patted Connolly's shoulder. "I told you they'd be impressed. Did you see that, Ryker?"

Ryker nodded curtly, as they entered his living room pulled off his straw hat and tossed it on to a couch under the window. The room was dingy and cheerless.

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Crude bamboo shelves were strung around the walls, ornamented with a few primitive carvings of ivory and bamboo. A couple of rocking chairs and a card-table were in the center of the room, dwarfed by an immense victorian mahogany dresser standing against the rear wall. With its castellated mirrors and ornamental pediments it looked like an altar-piece stolen from a cathedral. At first glance it appeared to be leaning to one side, but then Connolly saw that its rear legs had been carefully raised from the tilting floor with a number of small wedges. In the center of the dresser, its multiple reflections receding to infinity in a pair of small wing mirrors, was a cheap three-dollar alarm clock, ticking away loudly. An over-and-under Winchester shotgun leaned against the wall beside it.

Gesturing Pereira and Connolly into the chairs, Ryker raised the blind over the rear window. Outside was the compound, the circle of huts around its perimeter. A few Indians squatted in the shadows, spears upright between their knees.

Connolly watched Ryker moving about in front of him, aware that the man's earlier impatience had given away to a faint but noticeable edginess. Ryker glanced irritably through the window, apparently annoyed to see the gradual gathering of the Indians before their huts.

There was a sweetly unsavory smell in the room, and over his shoulder Connolly saw that the card-table was loaded with a large bale of miniature animal skins, those of a vole or some other forest rodent. A half-hearted attempt had been made to trim the skins, and tags of clotted blood clung to their margins.

Ryker jerked the table with his foot. "Well, here you are," he said to Pereira. "Twelve dozen. They took a hell of a lot of getting, I can tell you. You've brought the clock?"

—

PEREIRA nodded, still holding the parcel in his lap. He gazed distastefully at the dank scruffy skins. "Have you got some rats in there, Ryker? These don't look much good. Perhaps we should check through them outside. . . ."

"Dammit, Pereira, don't be a fool!" Ryker snapped. "They're as good as you'll get. I had to trim half the skins myself. Let's have a look at the clock."

"Wait a minute." The Captain's jovial, easy-going manner had stiffened. Making the most of his temporary advantage, he reached out and touched one of the skins gingerly, shaking his head. "Pugh. . . . Do you know how much I paid for this clock, Ryker? Seventy-five dollars.

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That's your credit for three years. I'm not so sure. And you're not very helpful, you know. Now about this aircraft that may have come down—"

Ryker snapped his fingers. "Forget it. Nothing did. The Nambas tell me everything." He turned to Connolly. "You can take it from me there's no trace of an aircraft around here. Any rescue mission would be wasting their time."

Pereira watched Ryker critically. "As a matter of fact it wasn't an aircraft." He tapped Connolly's shoulder flash. "It was a rocket capsule—with a man on board. A very important and valuable man. None other than the Moon pilot, Colonel Francis Spender."

"Well. . . ." Eyebrows raised in mock surprise, Ryker ambled to the window, stared out at a group of Indians who had advanced half-way across the compound. "My God, what next! The Moon pilot. Do they really think he's around here? But what a place to roost." He leaned out of the window and bellowed at the Indians, who retreated a few paces and then held their ground. "Damn fools," he muttered, "this isn't a zoo."

Pereira handed him the parcel, watching the Indians. There were more than fifty around the compound now, squatting in their doorways, a few of the younger men honing their spears. "They are remarkably curious," he said to Ryker, who had taken the parcel over to the dresser and was unwrapping it carefully. "Surely they've seen a pale-skinned man before?"

"They've nothing better to do." Ryker lifted the clock out of the cabinet with his big hands, with great care placed it beside the alarm clock, the almost inaudible motion of its pendulum lost in the metallic chatter of the latter's escapement. For a moment he gazed at the ornamental hands and numerals. Then he picked up the alarm clock and with an almost valedictory pat, like an officer dismissing a faithful if stupid minion, locked it away in the cupboard below. His former buoyancy returning, he gave Pereira a playful slap on the shoulder. "Captain, if you want any more rat-skins just give me a shout!"

BACKING away, Pereira's heel touched one of Connolly's feet, distracting him from a problem he had been puzzling over since their entry into the hut. Like a concealed clue in a detective story, he was sure that he had noticed something of significance, but was unable to identify it.

"We won't worry about the skins," Pereira said. "What we'll do with your assistance, Ryker, is

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to hold a little parley with the chiefs, see whether they remember anything of this capsule."

Ryker stared out at the Indians now standing directly below the veranda. Irritably he slammed down the blind. "For God's sake, Pereira, they don't. Tell the Lieutenant he isn't interviewing people on Park Avenue or Piccadilly. If the Indians had seen anything I'd know."

"Perhaps." Pereira shrugged. "Still, I'm under instructions to assist Lieutenant Connolly and it won't do any harm to ask."

Connolly sat up. "Having come this far, Captain, I feel I should do two or three forays into the bush." To Ryker he explained: "They've recalculated the flight path of the final trajectory, there's a chance he may have come down further along the landing zone. Here, very possibly."

Shaking his head, Ryker slumped down on to the couch, and drove one fist angrily into the other. "I suppose this means they'll be landing here at any time with thousands of bulldozers and flame-throwers. Dammit, Lieutenant, if you have to send a man to the Moon, why don't you do it in your own back yard?"

Pereira stood up. "We'll be gone in a couple of days, Ryker." He nodded judiciously at Connolly and moved toward the door.

As Connolly climbed to his feet Ryker called out suddenly: "Lieutenant. You can tell me something I've wondered." There was an unpleasant downward curve to his mouth, and his tone was belligerent and provocative. "Why did they really send a man to the Moon?"

Connolly paused. He had remained silent during the conversation, not wanting to antagonize Ryker. The rudness and complete self-immersion were pathetic rather than annoying. "Do you mean the military and political reasons?"

"No, I don't." Ryker stood up, arms akimbo again, measuring Connolly. "I mean the *real* reasons, Lieutenant."

CONNOLLY gestured vaguely. For some reason formulating a satisfactory answer seemed more difficult than he had expected. "Well, I suppose you could say it was the natural spirit of exploration."

Ryker snorted derisively. "Do you seriously believe that, Lieutenant? 'The spirit of exploration!' My God! What a fantastic idea. Pereira doesn't believe that, do you Captain?"

Before Connolly could reply Pereira took his arm. "Come on, Lieutenant. This is no time for a metaphysical discussion." To Ryker he added: "It doesn't much matter what you and I believe,

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Ryker. A man went to the Moon and came back. He needs our help."

Ryker frowned ruefully. "Poor chap. He must be feeling pretty hungry by now. Though anyone who gets as far as the Moon and is fool enough to come back deserves what he gets."

There was a scuffle of feet on the veranda, and as they stepped out into the sunlight a couple of Indians darted away along the jetty, watching Connolly with undiminished interest.

Ryker remained in the doorway, staring listlessly at the clock, but as they were about to climb into the launch he came after them. Now and then glancing over his shoulder at the encroaching semi-circle of Indians, he gazed down at Connolly with sardonic contempt. "Lieutenant," he called out before they went below. "Has it occurred to you that if he had landed, Spender might have wanted to stay on here?"

"I doubt it, Ryker," Connolly said calmly. "Anyway, there's little chance that Colonel Spender is still alive. What we're interested in finding is the capsule."

Ryker was about to reply when a faint metallic buzz sounded from the direction of his hut. He looked around sharply, waiting for it to end, and for a moment the whole tableau, composed of the men on the launch, the gaunt outcast on the edge of the jetty and the Indians behind him, was frozen in an absurdly motionless posture. The mechanism of the old alarm clock had obviously been fully wound, and the buzz sounded for thirty seconds, finally ending with a high-pitched ping.

Pereira grinned. He glanced at his watch. "It keeps good time, Ryker." But Ryker had stalked off back to the hut, scattering the Indians before him.

Connolly watched the group dissolve, then suddenly snapped his fingers. "You're right, Captain. It certainly does keep good time," he repeated as they entered the cabin.

EVIDENTLY tired by the encounter with Ryker, Pereira slumped down among Connolly's equipment and unbuttoned his tunic. "Sorry about Ryker, but I warned you. Frankly, Lieutenant, we might as well leave now. There's nothing here. Ryker knows that. However, he's no fool, and he's quite capable of faking all sorts of evidence just to get a retainer out of you. He wouldn't mind if the bulldozers came."

"I'm not so sure." Connolly glanced briefly through the porthole. "Captain, has Ryker got a radio?"

"Of course not. Why?"

"Are you certain?"

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"Absolutely. It's the last thing the man would have. Anyway, there's no electrical supply here, and he has no batteries." He noticed Connolly's intent expression. "What's on your mind, Lieutenant?"

"You're his only contact? There are no other traders in the area?"

"None. The Indians are too dangerous, and there's nothing to trade. Why do you think Ryker has a radio?"

"He must have. Or something very similar. Captain, just now you remarked on the fact that his old alarm clock kept good time. Does it occur to you to ask *how?*"

Pereira sat up slowly. "Lieutenant, you have a valid point."

"Exactly. I knew there was something odd about those two clocks when they were standing side by side. That type of alarm clock is the cheapest obtainable, notoriously inaccurate. Often they lose two or three minutes in 24 hours. But that clock was telling the right time to within ten seconds. No optical instrument would give him that degree of accuracy."

Pereira shrugged skeptically. "But I haven't been here for over four months. And even then he didn't check the time with me."

"Of course not. He didn't need to. The only possible explanation for such a degree of accuracy is that he's getting a daily time fix, either on a radio or some long-range beacon."

"Wait a moment, Lieutenant." Pereira watched the dusk light fall across the jungle. "It's a remarkable coincidence, but there must be an innocent explanation. Don't jump straight to the conclusion that Ryker has some instrument taken from the missing Moon capsule. Other aircraft have crashed in the forest. And what would be the point? He's not running an airline or railway system. Why should he need to know the time, the *exact* time, to within ten seconds?"

Connolly tapped the lid of his monitoring case, controlling his growing exasperation at Pereira's reluctance to treat the matter seriously, at his whole permissive attitude of lazy tolerance towards Ryker, the Indians and the forest. Obviously he unconsciously resented Connolly's sharp-eyed penetration of this private world.

"Clocks have become his idée fixe," Pereira continued. "Perhaps he's developed an amazing sensitivity to its mechanism. Knowing exactly the right time could be a substitute for the civilization on which he turned his back." Thoughtfully, Pereira moistened the end of his cheroot. "But I agree that it's strange. Perhaps a little investigation would be worth while after all."

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AFTER a cool jungle night in the air-conditioned cabin, the next day Connolly began discretely to reconnoitre the area. Pereira took ashore two bottles of whiskey and a soda syphon, and was able to keep Ryker distracted while Connolly roved about the campong with his monitoring equipment. Once or twice he heard Ryker bellow jocularly at him from his window as he lolled back over the whiskey. At intervals, as Ryker slept, Pereira would come out into the sun, sweating like a drowzy pig in his stained uniform, and try to drive back the Indians.

"As long as you stay within earshot of Ryker you're safe," he told Connolly. Chopped-out pathways criss-crossed the bush at all angles, a fresh pathway driven through the foliage whenever one of the bands returned to the campong, irrespective of those already established. This maze extended for miles around them. "If you get lost, don't panic but stay where you are. Sooner or later we'll come out and find you."

Eventually giving up his attempt to monitor any of the signal beacons built into the lost capsule—both the sonar and radio meters remained at zero—Connolly tried to communicate with the Indians by sign language, but with the exception of one, the youth with the moist limpid eyes who had been hanging about on Ryker's veranda, they merely stared at him stonily. This youth Pereira identified as the son of the former witch-doctor ("Ryker's more or less usurped his role, for some reason the old boy lost the confidence of the tribe"). While the other Indians gazed at Connolly as if seeing some invisible numinous shadow, some extra-corporeal nimbus which pervaded his body, the youth was obviously aware that Connolly possessed some special talent, perhaps not dissimilar from that which his father had once practised. However, Connolly's attempts to talk to the youth were handicapped by the fact that he was suffering from a purulent ophthalmia, gonococchic in origin and extremely contagious, which made his eyes water continuously. Many of the Indians suffered from this complaint, threatened by permanent blindness, and Connolly had seen them treating their eyes with water in which a certain type of fragrant bark had been dissolved.

RYKER'S casual, off-hand authority over the Indians puzzled Connolly. Slumped back in his chair against the mahogany dresser, one hand touching the ormolu clock, most of the time he and Pereira indulged in a lachrymose back-chat. Then, ob-

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livious of any danger, Ryker would amble out into the dusty campong, push his way blurrily through the Indians and drum up a party to collect fire wood for the water still, jerking them bodily to their feet as they squatted about their huts. What interested Connolly was the Indians' reaction to this type of treatment. They seemed to be restrained, not by any belief in his strength of personality or primitive kingship, but by a grudging acceptance that for the time being at any rate, Ryker possessed the whip hand over them all. Obviously Ryker served certain useful roles for them as an intermediary with the Mission, but this alone would not explain the sources of his power. Beyond certain more or less defined limits—the perimeter of the campong—his authority was minimal.

A hint of explanation came on the second morning of their visit, when Connolly accidentally lost himself in the forest.

* * *

AFTER breakfast Connolly sat under the awning on the deck of the patrol launch, gazing out over the brown, jelly-like surface of the river. The campong was silent. During the night the Indians had disappeared into the bush. Like lemmings they were apparently prone to these sudden irresistible urges. Occasionally the nomadic call would be strong enough to carry them 200 miles away; at other times they would set off in high spirits and then lose interest after a few miles, returning dispiritedly to the campong in small groups.

Deciding to make the most of their absence, Connolly shouldered the monitoring equipment and climbed onto the pier. A few dying fires smoked plaintively among the huts, and abandoned utensils and smashed pottery lay about in the red dust. In the distance the morning haze over the forest had lifted, and Connolly could see what appeared to be a low hill—a shallow rise no more than a hundred feet in height—which rose off the flat floor of the jungle a quarter of a mile away.

On his right, among the huts, someone moved. An old man sat alone among the refuse of pottery shards and raffia baskets, cross-legged under a small makeshift awning. Barely distinguishable from the dust, his diseased moribund figure seemed to contain the whole futility and degradation of the Amazon forest.

Still musing on Ryker's motives for isolating himself in the jungle, Connolly made his way towards the distant rise.

Ryker's behavior the previous evening had been curious. Shortly after dusk, when the sunset sank into the western forest,

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bathing the jungle in an immense ultramarine and golden light, the day-long chatter and movement of the Indians ceased abruptly. Connolly had been glad of the silence—the endless thwacks of the rattan canes and grating of the stone mills in which they mixed the Government-issue meal had become tiresome. Pereira made several cautious visits to the edge of the campong, and each time reported that the Indians were sitting in a huge circle outside their huts, watching Ryker's bungalow. The latter was lounging on his veranda in the moonlight, chin in hand, one boot up on the rail, morosely surveying the assembled tribe.

"They've got their spears and ceremonial feathers," Pereira whispered. "For a moment I almost believed they were preparing an attack."

After waiting half an hour, Connolly climbed up on to the pier, found the Indians squatting in their dark silent circle, Ryker glaring down at them. Only the witch-doctor's son made any attempt to approach Connolly, sidling tentatively through the shadows, a piece of what appeared to be blue obsidian in his hand, some talisman of his father's that had lost its potency.

Uneasily, Connolly returned to the launch, and shortly after 3 a.m. they were wakened in their bunks by a tremendous whoop, reached the deck to hear the stampede of feet through the dust, the hissing of overturned fires and cooking pots. Apparently leading the pack, Ryker, emitting a series of re-echoed 'Harooh's!', disappeared into the bush. Within a minute the campong was empty.

"What game is Ryker playing?" Pereira muttered as they stood on the creaking jetty in the dusty moonlight. "This must be the focus of his authority over the Nambas." Baffled, they went back to their bunks.

REACHING the margins of the rise, Connolly strolled through a small orchard which had returned to nature, hearing in his mind the exultant roar of Ryker's voice as it had cleaved the midnight jungle. Idly he picked a few of the barely ripe guavas and vividly colored cajus with their astringent delicately flavored juice. After spitting away the pith, he searched for a way out of the orchard, within a few minutes realized that he was lost.

A continuous mound when seen from the distance, the rise was in fact a nexus of small hillocks that formed the residue of a one-time system of ox-bow lakes, and the basins between the slopes were still treacherous with deep mire. Connolly rested his equipment at the foot of a tree.

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Withdrawing his pistol, he fired two shots into the air in the hope of attracting Ryker and Pereira. He sat down to await his rescue, taking the opportunity to unlatch his monitors and wipe the dials.

After ten minutes no one had appeared. Feeling slightly demoralized, and frightened that the Indians might return and find him, Connolly shouldered his equipment and set off towards the north-west, in the approximate direction of the campong. The ground rose before him. Suddenly, as he turned behind a palisade of wild magnolia trees, he stepped into an open clearing on the crest of the hill.

Squatting on their heels against the tree-trunks and among the tall grass were what seemed to be the entire tribe of the Nambikwaras. They were facing him, their expressions immobile and watchful, eyes like white beads among the sheaves. Presumably they had been sitting in the clearing, only fifty yards away, when he fired his shots, and Connolly had the uncanny feeling that they had been waiting for him to make his entrance exactly at the point he had chosen.

Hesitating, Connolly tightened his grip on the radio monitor. The Indians faces were like burnished teak, their shoulders painted with a delicate mosaic of earth colors. Noticing the spears held among the grass, Connolly started to walk on across the clearing towards a breach in the palisade of trees.

For a dozen steps the Indians remained motionless. Then, with a chorus of yells, they leapt forward from the grass and surrounded Connolly in a jabbering pack. None of them were more than five feet tall, but their plump agile bodies buffeted him about, almost knocking him off his feet. Eventually the tumult steadied itself, and two or three of the leaders stepped from the cordon and began to scrutinize Connolly more closely, pinching and fingering him with curious positional movements of the thumb and forefinger, like connoisseurs examining some interesting taxidermic object.

FINALLY, with a series of high-pitched whines and grunts, the Indians moved off towards the center of the clearing, propelling Connolly in front of them with sharp slaps on his legs and shoulders, like drovers goading on a large pig. They were all jabbering furiously to each other, some hacking at the grass with their machetes, gathering bundles of leaves in their arms.

Tripping over something in the grass, Connolly stumbled onto his knees. The catch slipped

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from the lid of the monitor, and as he stood up, fumbling with the heavy cabinet, the revolver slipped from his holster and was lost under his feet in the rush.

Giving way to his panic, he began to shout over the bobbing heads around him, to his surprise he heard one of the Indians beside him bellow to the others. Instantly, as the refrain was taken up, the crowd stopped and re-formed its cordon around him. Gasping, Connolly steadied himself, and started to search the trampled grass for his revolver, when he realized that the Indians were now staring, not at himself, but at the exposed counters of the monitor. The six meters were swinging wildly after the stampede across the clearing, and the Indians craned forward, their machetes and spears lowered, gaping at the bobbing needles.

Then there was a roar from the edge of the clearing, and a huge wild-faced man in a straw hat, a shot-gun held like a crowbar in his massive hands, stormed in among the Indians, driving them back. Dragging the monitor from his neck, Connolly felt the steadying hand of Captain Pereira take his elbow.

"Lieutenant, Lieutenant," Pereira murmured reprovingly as they recovered the pistol and made their way back to the campong, the uproar behind them fading among the undergrowth, "we were nearly in time to say grace."

* * *

LATER that afternoon Connolly sat back in a canvas chair on the deck of the launch. About half the Indians had returned, and were wandering about the huts in a desultory manner, kicking at the fires. Ryker, his authority re-asserted, had returned to his bungalow.

"I thought you said they weren't cannibal," Connolly reminded Pereira.

The Captain snapped his fingers, as if thinking about something more important. "No they're not. Stop worrying, Lieutenant, you're not going to end up in a pot." When Connolly demurred he swung crisply on his heel. He had sharpened up his uniform, and wore his pistol belt and Sam Browne at their regulation position, his peaked cap jutting low over his eyes. Evidently Connolly's close escape had confirmed some private suspicion. "Look, they're not cannibal in the dietary sense of the term, as used by the Food & Agriculture Organization in its classification of aboriginal peoples. They won't stalk and hunt human game in preference for any other. But—" here the Captain stared fixedly at Connolly"—in certain circumstances, after a fertility ceremon-

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ial, for example, they will eat human flesh. Like all members of primitive communities which are small numerically, the Nambikwara never bury their dead. Instead, they eat them, as a means of conserving the loss and to perpetuate the corporeal identity of the departed. Now do you understand?"

Connolly grimaced. "I'm glad to know now that I was about to be perpetuated."

Pereira looked out at the campong. "Actually they would never eat a white man, to avoid defiling the tribe." He paused. "At least, so I've always believed. It's strange, something seems to have. . . . Listen, Lieutenant," he explained, "I can't quite piece it together, but I'm convinced we should stay here for a few days longer. Various elements make me suspicious, I'm sure Ryker is hiding something. That mound where you were lost is a sort of sacred tumulus, the way the Indians were looking at your instrument made me certain that they'd seen something like it before—perhaps a panel with many flickering dials. . . .?"

"The *Goliath 7?*" Connolly shook his head skeptically. He listened to the massive undertow of the river drumming dimly against the keel of the launch. "I doubt it, Captain. I'd like to believe you, but for some reason it just doesn't seem very likely."

"I agree. Some other explanation is preferable. But what? The Indians were squatting on that hill, waiting for someone to arrive. What else could your monitor have reminded them of?"

"Ryker's clock?" Connolly suggested. "They may regard it as a sort of ju-ju object, like a magical toy."

"No," Pereira said categorically. "These Indians are highly pragmatic, they're not impressed by useless toys. For them to be deterred from killing you means that the equipment you carried possessed some very real, down-to-earth power. Look, suppose the capsule did land here and was secretly buried by Ryker, and that in some way the clocks help him to identify its whereabouts —" here Pereira shrugged hopefully "—it's just possible."

HARDLY," Connolly said. "Besides, Ryker couldn't have buried the capsule himself, and if Colonel Spender had lived through re-entry Ryker would have helped him."

"I'm not so sure," Pereira said pensively. "It would probably strike our friend Mr. Ryker as very funny for a man to travel all the way to the Moon and back just to be killed by savages. Much too good a joke to pass over."

"What religious beliefs do the Indians have?" Connolly asked.

"No religion in the formalized

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sense of a creed and dogma. They eat their dead so they don't need to invent an after-life in an attempt to re-animate them. In general they subscribe to one of the so-called cargo cults. As I said, they're very material. That's why they're so lazy. Some time in the future they expect a magic galleon or giant bird to arrive carrying an everlasting cornucopia of worldly goods, so they just sit about waiting for the great day. Ryker encourages them in this idea. It's very dangerous—in some Melanesian islands the tribes with cargo cults have degenerated completely. They lie around all day on the beaches, waiting for the W.H.O. flying boat, or . . ." His voice trailed off.

Connolly nodded and supplied the unspoken thought. "Or—a space capsule?"

* * *

DESPITE Pereira's growing if muddled conviction that something associated with the missing space-craft was to be found in the area, Connolly was still skeptical. His close escape had left him feeling curiously calm and emotionless, and he looked back on his possible death with fatalistic detachment, identifying it with the total ebb and flow of life in the Amazon forests, with its myriad unremembered deaths, and with the endless vistas of dead trees leaning across the jungle paths radiating from the campong. After only two days the jungle had begun to invest his mind with its own logic, and the possibility of the space-craft landing there seemed more and more remote. The two elements belonged to different systems of natural order, and he found it increasingly difficult to visualize them overlapping. In addition there was a deeper reason for his skepticism, underlined by Ryker's reference to the 'real' reasons for the space-flights. The implication was that the entire space program was a symptom of some inner unconscious malaise afflicting mankind, and in particular the western technocracies, and that the space craft and satellites had been launched because their flights satisfied certain buried compulsions and desires. By contrast, in the jungle, where the unconscious was manifest and exposed, there was no need for these insane projections, and the likelihood of the Amazonas playing any part in the success or failure of the space flight became, by a sort of psychological parallax, increasingly blurred and distant, the missing capsule itself a fragment of a huge disintegrating fantasy.

However he agreed to Pereira's request to borrow the monitors and follow Ryker and the Indians

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on their midnight romp through the forest.

Once again, after dusk, the same ritual silence descended over the campong, and the Indians took up their positions in the doors of their huts. Like some morose exiled princeling, Ryker sat sprawled on his veranda, one eye on the clock through the window behind him. In the moonlight the scores of moist dark eyes never wavered as they watched him.

At last, half an hour later, Ryker galvanized his great body into life, with a series of tremendous whoops raced off across the campong, leading the stampede into the bush. Away in the distance, faintly outlined by the quarter moon, the shallow hump of the tribal tumulus rose over the black canopy of the jungle. Pereira waited until the last heel beats had subsided, then climbed onto the pier and disappeared among the shadows.

Far away Connolly could hear the faint cries of Ryker's pack as they made off through the bush, the sounds of machetes slashing at the undergrowth. An ember on the opposite side of the campong flared in the low wind, illuminating the abandoned old man, presumably the former witch doctor, whom he had seen that morning. Beside him was another slimmer figure, the limpid-eyed youth who had followed Connolly about.

A door stirred on Ryker's veranda, providing Connolly with a distant image of the white moonlit back of the river reflected in the mirrors of the mahogany dresser. Connolly watched the door jump lightly against the latch, then walked quietly across the pier to the wooden steps.

A few empty tobacco tins lay about on the shelves around the room, and a stack of empty bottles cluttered one corner behind the door. The ormolu clock had been locked away in the mahogany dresser. After testing the doors, which had been secured with a stout padlock, Connolly noticed a dog-eared paper-backed book lying on the dresser beside a half-empty carton of cartridges.

ON a faded red ground, the small black lettering on the cover was barely decipherable, blurred by the sweat from Ryker's fingers. At first glance it appeared to be a set of logarithm tables. Each of the eighty or so pages was covered with column after column of finely printed numerals and tabular material.

Curious, Connolly carried the manual over to the doorway. The title page was more explicit.

ECHO III
CONSOLIDATED TABLES OF
CELESTIAL TRAVELERS

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1965-1980. TIMES THROUGHOUT G.M.T. Published by the National Astronautics and Space Administration, Washington, D.C., 1965. Part XV. Longitude 40-80 West, Latitude 10 North-35 South (South American Sub-Continent) Price 35¢.

His interest quickening, Connolly turned the pages. The manual fell open at the section headed: Lat. 5 South, Long. 60 West. He remembered that this was the approximate position of Campos Buros. Tabulated by year, month and day, the columns of figures listed the elevations and compass bearings for sighting of the Echo III satellite, the latest of the huge aluminium spheres which had been orbiting the earth since Echo I was launched in 1959. Rough pencil lines had been drawn through all the entries up to the year 1968. At this point the markings became individual, each minuscule entry crossed off with a small blunt stroke. The pages were grey with the blurred graphite.

Guided by this careful patchwork of cross-hatching, Connolly found the latest entry: March 17, 1978. The time and sighting were: *6-22 a.m. Elevation 43 degrees WNW, Copella-Eridanus.* Below it was the entry for the next day, an hour later, its orientations differing slightly.

Ruefully shaking his head in admiration of Ryker's cleverness, Connolly looked at his watch. It was about 1-20, almost exactly five hours until the next traverse. Connolly glanced perfunctorily at the sky, picking out the constellation Capella, from which the satellite would emerge.

So this explained Ryker's hold over the Indians! What more impressive means had a down-and-out white man of intimidating and astonishing a tribe of primitive savages? Armed with nothing more than a set of tables and a reliable clock, he could virtually pin-point the appearance of the satellite at the first second of its visible traverse. The Indians would naturally be awed and bewildered by this phantom charioteer of the midnight sky, steadily pursuing its cosmic round, like a beacon traversing the profoundest deeps of their own unconscious. Any powers which Ryker cared to invest in the satellite would seem confirmed by his ability to control the time and place of its arrival.

CONNOLLY realized now how the old alarm clock had told the correct time—by using his tables Ryker had read the exact time off the sky each night. A more accurate clock presumably freed him from the need to spend unnecessary time waiting for the satellite's arrival; he would now

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be able to set off for the tumulus only a few minutes beforehand.

Yet tonight he had gone out five hours early? Puzzling over this, Connolly noticed that the manual employed Greenwich Mean Time, and that the satellite would appear over the forest at 1-22 a.m. local time.

Backing along the pier, he began to search the sky. Away in the distance a low cry sounded into the midnight air, diffusing like a wraith over the jungle. Beside him, sitting on the bows of the launch, Connolly heard the helmsman grunt and point at the sky above the opposite bank. Following the up-raised arm, he quickly found the speeding dot of light. It was moving directly towards the tumulus, and Connolly visualized the awe and consternation that would be manifest there. Steadily the satellite crossed the sky, winking intermittently as it passed behind lanes of high-altitude cirrus, the conscripted ship of the Nambikwaras' cargo cult.

It was about to disappear among the stars in the south-east when a faint shuffling sound distracted Connolly. He looked down to find the moist-eyed youth, the son of the witch doctor, standing only a few feet away from him, regarding him dolefully.

"Hello, boy," Connolly greeted him. He pointed at the vanishing satellite. "See the star?"

The youth made a barely perceptible nod. He hesitated for a moment, his running eyes glowing like drowned moons, then stepped forward and touched Connolly's wrist-watch, tapping the dial with his horny finger nail.

Puzzled, Connolly held it up for him to inspect. The youth watched the second hand sweep around the dial, an expression of rapt and ecstatic concentration on his face. Nodding vigorously, he pointed to the sky.

Connolly grinned. "So you understand? You've rumbled old man Ryker, have you?" He nodded encouragingly to the youth, who was tapping the watch eagerly, apparently in an effort to conjure up a second satellite. Connolly began to laugh. "Sorry, boy." He slapped the manual. "What you really need is this pack of jokers."

CONNOLLY began to walk back to the bungalow, when the youth darted forward impulsively and blocked his way, thin legs spread widely in an aggressive stance. Then, with immense ceremony, he drew from behind his back a round painted object with a glass face that Connolly remembered he had seen him carrying before.

"That looks interesting." Connolly bent down to examine the object, caught a glimpse in the

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thin light of a luminous instrument dial before the youth snatched it away.

"Wait a minute, boy. Let's have another look at that."

After a pause the pantomime was repeated, but the youth was reluctant to allow Connolly more than the briefest inspection. Again Connolly saw a calibrated dial and a wavering indicator. He searched his pockets for something the youth would accept, when the latter stepped forward and touched Connolly's wrist.

Quickly Connolly unstrapped the metal chain. He tossed the watch to the youth, who instantly dropped the instrument, his barter achieved, and after a delighted yodel turned and darted off among the trees.

Bending down, careful not to touch the instrument with his hands, Connolly examined the dial. The metal housing around it was badly torn and scratched, as if the instrument had been pried from some control panel with a crude implement. But the glass face and the dial beneath it were still intact. Across the center was the legend:

LUNAR ALTIMETER
Miles: 100
GOLIATH 7
General Electric Corporation,
Schenectedy

Picking up the instrument, Connolly cradled it in his hands, for a moment feeling like Parsifal holding the Holy Grail. The pressure seals were unbroken, and the gyro bath floated freely on its air cushion. Like a graceful bird the indicator needle glided up and down the scale.

THE pier creaked softly under approaching footsteps. Connolly looked up at the perspiring figure of Captain Pereira, cap in one hand, monitor dangling from the other.

"My dear Lieutenant!" he panted, "Wait till I tell you, what a farce, it's fantastic! Do you know what Ryker's doing?—it's so simple it seems unbelievable that no one's thought of it before. It's nothing short of the most magnificent practical *joke!*" Gasping, he sat down on the bale of skins leaning against the gangway. "I'll give you a clue: Narcissus."

"Echo," Connolly replied flatly, still staring at the instrument in his hands.

"You spotted it? Clever boy!" Pereira wiped his cap-band. "How did you guess? It wasn't that obvious." He took the manual Connolly handed him. "What the—? Ah, I see, this makes it even more clear. Of course." He slapped his knee with the manual. "You found this in his room? I take my hat off to Ryker," he continued as Connolly set the altimeter down on the pier and steadied it carefully. "Let's face

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it, it's something of a pretty clever trick. Can you imagine it, he comes here, finds a tribe with a strong cargo cult, opens his little manual and says 'Presto, the great white bird will be arriving: NOW!' "

Connolly nodded, then stood up, wiping his hands on a strip of rattan. When Pereira's laughter had subsided he pointed down to the glowing face of the altimeter at their feet. "Captain, something else arrived," he said quietly. "Never mind Ryker and the satellite. This cargo actually landed."

As Pereira knelt down and inspected the altimeter, whistling sharply to himself, Connolly walked over to the edge of the pier and looked out across the great back of the silent river at the giant trees which hung over the water, like forlorn mutes at some cataclysmic funeral, their thin silver voices carried away on the dead tide.

* * *

HALF an hour before they set off the next morning, Connolly waited on the deck for Captain Pereira to conclude his interrogation of Ryker. The empty campong, deserted again by the Indians, basked in the heat, a single plume of smoke curling into the sky. The old witch doctor and his son had disappeared, perhaps to try their skill with a neighboring tribe, but the loss of his watch was unregretted by Connolly. Down below, safely stowed away among his baggage, was the altimeter, carefully sterilized and sealed. On the table in front of him, no more than two feet from the pistol in his belt, lay Ryker's manual.

For some reason he did not want to see Ryker, despite his contempt for him, and when Pereira emerged from the bungalow he was relieved to see that he was alone. Connolly had decided that he would not return with the search parties when they came to find the capsule; Pereira would serve adequately as a guide.

"Well?"

The Captain smiled wanly. "Oh, he admitted it, of course." He sat down on the rail, and pointed to the manual. "After all, he had no choice. Without that his existence here would be untenable."

"He admitted that Colonel Spender landed here?"

Pereira nodded. "Not in so many words, but effectively. The capsule is buried somewhere here —under the tumulus, I would guess. The Indians got hold of Colonel Spender, Ryker claims he could do nothing to help him."

"That's a lie. He saved me in the bush when the Indians thought I had landed."

With a shrug, Pereira said:

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"Your positions were slightly different. Besides, my impression is that Spender was dying anyway, Ryker says the parachute was badly burnt. He probably accepted a *fait accompli*, simply decided to do nothing and hush the whole thing up, incorporating the landing into the cargo cult. Very useful too. He'd been tricking the Indians with the Echo satellite, but sooner or later they would have become impatient. Ater the *Goliath* crashed, of course, they were prepared to go on watching the Echo and waiting for the next landing forever." A faint smile touched his lips. "It goes without saying that he regards the episode as something of a macabre joke. On you and the whole civilized world."

A DOOR slammed on the veranda, and Ryker stepped out into the sunlight. Bare-chested and hatless, he strode towards the launch.

"Connolly," he called down, "you've got my book of tricks there!"

Connolly reached forward and fingered the manual, the butt of his pistol tapping the table edge. He looked up at Ryker, at his big golden frame bathed in the morning light. Despite his still belligerent tone, a subtle change had come over Ryker. The ironic gleam in his eye had gone, and the inner core of wariness and suspicion which had warped the man and exiled him from the world was now visible. Connolly realized that, curiously, their respective roles had been reversed. He remembered Pereira reminding him that the Indians were at equilibrium with their environment, accepting its constraints and never seeking to dominate the towering arbors of the forest, in a sense an externalization of their own unconscious psyches. Ryker had upset that equilibrium, and by using the Echo satellite had brought the 20th century and its psychopathic projections into the heart of the Amazonian deep, transforming the Indians into a community of superstitious and materialistic sightseers, their whole culture oriented around the mythical god of the puppet star. It was Connolly who now accepted the jungle for what it was, acknowledging its fatalism and implacable indifference, seeing himself and the abortive space-flight in this fresh perspective, where tragedy and triumph were equally vainglorious.

Pereira gestured to the helmsman, and with a muffled roar the engine started. The launch pulled lightly against its lines.

"Connolly!" Ryker's voice was shriller now, his bellicose shout overlayed by a higher note. For a moment the two men looked at

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each other, and in the wavering, almost craven eyes above him Connolly glimpsed the helpless isolation of Ryker, his futile attempt to impose his will on the forest.

Picking up the manual, Connolly leaned forward and tossed it through the air on to the pier. Ryker tried to catch it, then knelt down and picked it up before it slipped through the springing poles. Still kneeling, he watched as the lines were cast off and the launch surged ahead.

They moved out into the channel and plunged through the bowers of spray into the heavier swells of the open current.

As they reached a sheltering bend and the somber figure of Ryker faded for the last time among the creepers and sunlight, Connolly turned to Pereira. "Captain—what actually happened to Colonel Spender? You said the Indians wouldn't eat a white man."

"They eat their gods," Pereira said.

THE END

☆ ☆ ☆

COMING NEXT MONTH

There's no let-up to the weird excitement FANTASTIC Magazine brings you. For example, the April issue will feature a long novelet by **Philip Jose Farmer,** *Some Fabulous Yonder;* an uncanny short story by **Fritz Leiber,** *The Casket Demon;* and a Fantasy Classic by **Erle Stanley Gardner,** *Rain Magic.*

PLUS other short stories, and all our regular features, and a magnificent and different cover Illustration *(l.)* by a new artist, Frank Bruno.

Be sure to get the April FANTASTIC at newsstands March 19.

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AN APPARITION

From the French of Guy de Maupassant

Illustrator COYE

Devotees of fantasy have so thoroughly ransacked the literature of the past that seldom can we hope to find a tale from times gone by. But recently we found an old and tattered volume of short stories and in it no less than three narratives we think you will enjoy. The first is a ghost story in the ancient tradition, written by France's master short-story craftsman.

IT was at the end of an evening of intimate social chat, in an old family mansion, and each one told a story of his or her personal experience—and vouched for the truth of it. Just then the old Marquis de la Tour-Samuel, eighty-two years old, rose and stood leaning against the chimney-piece, saying in a slightly trembling voice:

I, too, know a strange thing, so strange that it has been the bane of my life. It is now fifty-six years since it happened to me, and not a month has passed without my dreaming of it. I have had ever since that day a mark, a scar of fear, as it were. Yes, I went through such a horrible experience for ten minutes, that ever since I have had a constant terror. Unexpected noises make me tremble to the depths of my heart; things which I cannot see clearly in the twilight make me have a wild desire to run away, and I actually dread nightfall. Oh! I should not have told you all this if I were not so old. Now I can say anything. One is not expected to be brave before imaginary dangers at my age, but I assure you, ladies, that I have never quailed before real ones. This experience affected me so deeply and mysteriously that I have never yet told a soul of it, but have kept the secret locked in my breast, as if it were something to be ashamed of.

I will tell you the adventure as

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it happened, without trying to explain it. In fact, there is no possible explanation unless you assume that I was for the time out of my mind. But I was not out of my mind, and I will prove it to you, so you may think what you like, but here are the bare facts.

It was in July, 1827, and I was in garrison at Rouen. One day, as I was walking on the quay, I met a man whom I thought I knew, though I could not quite recall who it was. I made instinctively a motion to stop. The stranger saw the movement, looked at me, and fell into my arms. It was a friend of my boyhood, of whom I was very fond. In the five years since I had last seen him, he seemed to have grown older by half a century. His hair was perfectly white, and he walked with a stoop, as if worn out. He understood my surprise and told me his story. A terrible misfortune had made him a broken man.

Having fallen madly in love with a young girl, he had married her in a sort of ecstasy of happiness. After a year of unalloyed bliss she had suddenly died from some heart trouble, undoubtedly killed by love itself. He left his château the very day of the funeral and came to live in his house in Rouen, alone and desperate, overcome by grief, and thinking only of suicide.

"Since I have found you again," he said to me, "I am going to ask you to do me a great service. It is to go and look for me in the desk in my room—in our room—for some papers of which I am in great need. I cannot entrust this task to a servant or an agent, because it is necessary to have it done with great discretion and absolute silence. As for me, nothing would induce me to enter that house again. I will give you the key of the room, which I myself locked on leaving, and the key of my desk. You will also have a message from me to my gardener, who will open the château for you. But come and breakfast with me to-morrow, and we will talk it over."

I promised to do him this slight service. It was but a short jaunt for me, his house being situated about five leagues from Rouen.

AT ten o'clock the next morning I was with him. We breakfasted together, but he did not speak twenty words. He begged me to excuse him, saying that the thought of the visit which I was going to make to the room where his happiness lay buried was too much for him. He did indeed seem to me to be strangely moved, preoccupied, as if a mysterious struggle were going on in his soul. At last he explained to me exactly what I was

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to do, which was to get two packages of letters and one of papers which were in the first right-hand drawer of the desk to which I had the key. He added: "I need not ask you not to look about you."

I was a little hurt by these words, and told him so rather sharply. He stammered, "Forgive me, I am suffering so much," and he began to cry.

I left him about one o'clock to do my errand.

It was a glorious day, and I went at a rapid trot across the meadows, listening to the singing of the skylarks and the rhythmical sound of my sword against my boot. Before long I entered the forest and brought my horse to a walk. The branches of the trees brushed my face, and occasionally I bit off a leaf and crunched it eagerly, in one of those ecstasies of life which fills us, we know not how, with a flood of happiness, a sort of intoxication of strength.

As I neared the château, I felt in my pocket for the letter which I had for the gardener, and I saw to my surprise that it was sealed. I was so wounded and provoked that I thought of returning without carrying out my intention. Then I reflected that by doing this I should show unnecessary feeling. My friend had probably sealed the note mechanically, in the trouble he was in.

The house had the air of having been abandoned for twenty years. The entrance gate, open and rotten, remained upright by a miracle. Grass choked the pathways, and the borders of the grass-plots were no longer to be seen.

At the noise which I made by kicking against a shutter, an old man came out of a side door and seemed stupefied at seeing me. I jumped to the ground and gave him my letter. He read it, re-read it, turned it, looked me over, put it in his pocket and said:

"Well, what do you want?"

I answered brusquely:

"You ought to know, as you have just read your master's orders. I want to go into the house."

He seemed overcome and exclaimed:

"Then you are going into—into his room?"

I began to grow impatient. "What! are you going to question me?"

"No, sir, but it has—has not been opened since—since the death. If you will wait five minutes I will go—go see, if——"

I interrupted him angrily. "Oh, indeed; you will get it in order for me when you can't even get in, for I have the key."

He could say no more.

"Then, sir, I will show you the way."

"Just show me the staircase. I can find it very well without you."

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"But, sir, indeed I must—"

This time I quite lost my temper.

"Be silent, or you will get yourself into trouble," and I pushed him roughly aside and entered the house. I passed through the kitchen, then through two little rooms in which the man and his wife lived, and reached a large hall. I climbed the stairs and recognized the door described by my friend. I opened it without difficulty and entered.

THE room was so dark that at first I could distinguish nothing. I paused, struck by the mouldy, musty smell of shut-up, lifeless rooms. Then, by degrees, my eyes became used to the gloom, and I saw clearly enough a large disordered room, with a bed without hangings, but with mattress and pillows, of which one still bore the deep imprint of a head, as if some one had just been lying there. The chairs were scattered about, and I noticed that one door, probably that of a closet, was half open.

I went first to the window to get some light, and opened it; but the hinges of the outside shutters were so rusty that I could not move them. I even tried to break the shutters with my sword, but could not succeed.

As I was tired of these useless efforts, and as my eyes were now quite used to the dim light, I gave up the hope of seeing more clearly and went to the desk. I sat down in an easy-chair, lowered the lid, and opened the drawer. It was full to the brim. I only needed three packages and knew how to recognize them, so I began the search.

I was straining my eyes to decipher the superscriptions, when I thought I heard, or rather felt, a slight rustling behind me. I took no notice of it, thinking that a draught of air had made something move. But at the end of a minute, another movement, scarcely perceptible, made a very disagreeable shiver creep over me. It was so silly to be affected, even slightly, that I did not like to turn around, for very shame. I had secured the second bundle that I wanted, and had just found the third, when a deep and painful sigh, breathed over my shoulder, made me leap madly two yards away. I turned in my flight, with my hand on my sword-hilt, and indeed, if I had not felt that at my side I should have fled like a coward.

A large woman, in white, was standing behind the chair in which I had been sitting the instant before, looking at me.

Such a shiver ran through my limbs that I could not stand. Oh! no one who has not felt it can understand this frightful terror. One's brain reels, one's heart stands still, one's whole body be-

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comes like a sponge; it seems as if one's being crumbled. I do not believe in ghosts, but I have yielded to the hideous fear of the dead, and I have suffered—yes, in a few minutes suffered more than in all the rest of my life, in the terrible agony of supernatural fear.

If she had not spoken I might have died! But she did speak, in a sad and gentle voice, which made my nerves quiver. I cannot say that I became master of myself and found my reason again. No, I was so terrified that I no longer knew what I did, but the pride which I have, a pride of my soldier's trade, perhaps, made me keep, in spite of myself, a respectable appearance, both to myself and to her, whatever she was, woman or spectre. I thought of this afterward, for I can tell you that when it happened I thought of nothing. I was simply terror-stricken. She said:

"Oh, sir, you can do me a great favor."

I tried to answer, but I could not utter a word. An indistinct noise came from my lips. She spoke again:

"Will you? You can save me, cure me. I suffer frightfully. I suffer all the time. I suffer, oh! I suffer."

And she sat slowly down in my chair, looking at me.

"Will you?"

I motioned "Yes" with my head, my voice being still paralyzed. Then she held out to me a tortoise-shell comb and murmured:

"Comb my hair, oh! comb my hair. That will cure me. Some one must do it. Look at my head! How I suffer, and how badly my hair is arranged!"

HER unbound hair, very long and black it seemed to me, hung over the back of the chair and touched the floor.

Why did I do it, Why did I take the comb, shuddering, and why did I take in my hands her long hair which made me feel as cold as if I were handling serpents, I cannot tell.

That feeling has stayed in my fingers, and I shiver to think of it. I combed her hair. I touched—I do not know how—those icy tresses; I twisted and untwisted them; I braided them as they braid a horse's mane. She sighed, bent her head, and seemed happy.

Suddenly she said, "Thank you," took the comb from my hands, and went out by the door which I had noticed was half open.

Left alone, I had for some seconds the terrible fright which one has after the nightmare. Then I came to myself. I rushed to the window and burst open the shutters with a frightful blow.

Daylight flooded the room.

I sprang to the door through

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which the Something had disappeared.

It was closed and locked.

Then a fever of flight seized me, the true panic of battles. I snatched the three bundles of letters from the open desk, rushed across the room, leaped down the stairs four at a time, found myself outside, I knew not where, and seeing my horse ten feet away, bounded to his back and galloped off. I did not draw rein until I was in front of my lodgings at Rouen, when, throwing the bridle to my orderly, I fled to my room and locked myself in.

Then for an hour I asked myself anxiously if I had not been the victim of an hallucination. Yes, I must have had one of those strange nervous freaks which give rise to miracles, and to which the supernatural owes its strength.

And I had come to believe it was a vision, a deception of the senses, when I happened to go near the window.

My eyes accidentally fell on my breast. My coat was covered with hairs, long hairs of a woman, which were caught around the buttons. I took them one by one, and threw them out of the window with trembling fingers.

Then I called my orderly. I was too much disturbed to go to see my friend that day, and besides, I wanted to decide what I ought to tell him. I sent him the letters, for which he gave the soldier a receipt. He asked a great many questions about me.

They told him that I was suffering, that I had had a sunstroke, that—I do not know what.

He seemed uneasy.

* * *

I went early the next morning to see him, resolved to tell him the truth.

He had gone out the evening before and had not returned. I went again during the day, but no one had seen him. I waited a week. He did not appear.

Then I notified the authorities. They searched for him everywhere, without discovering the slightest trace of his flight.

A thorough search was made of the deserted château, but no discoveries were made.

There was no sign of a woman's having been concealed there.

The search amounting to nothing, it was given up. And after fifty-six years I have learned nothing. I know no more.

THE END

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The Wet Dungeon Straw

Translated from "Les Morts Bizarres" of Jean Richepin, by Walter Learned

A memorable short-short story of a man who knew the triumph of the spirit. A fantasy at once gay, pathetic, humorous, tragic.

HE had passed his first ten years in prison without doing anything, settling himself and fitting himself to the habits of the place. Then, as there were yet twenty years of prison life before him, he said one fine morning that it was shameful to lead so idle a life, and that he must create for himself some occupation worthy, not of a freeman, since he was a prisoner, but worthy simply of a man.

He devoted a year to reflection, to weighing the different ideas which presented themselves, to seeking a definite aim for his existence. To educate a spider, An old story too well known. To copy Pellico, indeed! A pure bit of plagiarism. To count with his fingers the rough places on the wall. A ridiculous amusement, useless and without appreciable results.

"I must," said he, "find something at the same time not, useful, and defying. I must invent a task which shall occupy my time, which shall be productive of some good, and which shall have the value of a protest." Another year was employed in this search, and at last success crowned his efforts.

It was a veritable dungeon, that in which the prisoner lived, which the sun entered but for one short half-hour daily, and then by a single ray which was a mere thread of light. The bed on which the unhappy man stretched his aching limbs was a pile of wet straw.

"The very thing," he cried with energy. "Now I shall defy my jailers and cheat the courts."

First he counted the separate straws that made up his bundle. These were one thousand three hundred and seven straws. A meagre bundle!

Then he made an experiment to find out how long it would take to dry a single straw. Three-quarters of an hour. It would require for them all—for the one thousand three hundred and sev-

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en straws—a total of nine hundred and eighty hours and fifteen minutes, with a half hour of sunshine a day, nineteen hundred and sixty-one days. Calculating that the sun would not shine at least one day out of three, it would require sixteen years, one month, one week and six days. He set to work at once.

EVERY day that the sun shone the prisoner carried a straw and put it in the sunshine, busying himself thus whenever there was sun. For the rest of the time he kept warm under his clothes the straws which he had been able to dry.

Thus ten years passed. The prisoner slept on only a third of the bundle of the damp straw, and he had stuffed in the bosom of his blouse the other two-thirds which, one by one, he had dried.

Fifteen years passed. Happiness unspeakable! Only one hundred and twenty-six damp straws remained.

Eighty-four days more, and the prisoner could scarcely contain himself. Proud of his work, victor over circumstances, he cried with the voice of an avenger, with a mocking, rebellious laugh:

"Ah! ah! You condemned me to the wet straw of a dungeon. Well, weep with rage! I sleep on dry straw."

Alas! Unfortunately a cruel destiny was watching for its prey.

One night while the prisoner dreamed of the happiness in store for him, in his wild joy he threw out his hands in speechless exultation, overset his water-jug, and the water ran trickling down his breast.

All of the straws were wet.

What to do now, To begin again the toil of Sisyphus, To pass fifteen years more putting straws to dry in the slender ray?

Oh, the discouragement of it! You, the fortunate ones of the world, who give up a pleasure if twenty five steps are necessary for its acquisition, dare you cast at him the first stone?

But you say, he had only a year and a half more in prison.

And do you count as nothing wounded pride, fallen hope? Think! this man would have worked fifteen years to sleep on a bundle of dry straw, and should he consent to quit his prison with wet straws clinging to his hair? Never! One is either worthy or unworthy.

* * *

Eight days and nights he writhed in agony, wrestling with despair, striving for a foothold in the ruin which overwhelmed him.

He finished by losing his hold and by acknowledging defeat. He had lost the battle.

One evening he fell on his

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knees, despairing and broken.

"O God," he cried in his tears, "pardon me that I have lost courage today. I have suffered for thirty years. I have felt my limbs waste, my skin mortify, my eyes grow dim and my hair and teeth fail me. I have resisted hunger, thirst, cold, and solitude. I had a hope which sustained my efforts. I had an aim in my life. Now it is impossible to satisfy my hope. Now the aim is gone forever. Pardon me that I desert my post, that I quit the field of battle, that I flee like a coward. I can bear it no longer." Then in a sudden access of indignation he cried:

"No, no, a thousand times no! It shall not be said that I have lost my life for nothing. I will not desert. I am not a coward. No, I will not sleep for a minute more on the damp straw of the dungeon. No, they shall not defeat me."

And the prisoner died during the night, conquered like Brutus, grand like Cato.

He died of an heroic indigestion. He had eaten all his straw.

THE END

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His Natal Star

A Story told in the Chicago *Journal* by Austyn Granville

Illustrator COYE

From the pages of a long-dead newspaper comes this quaint tale of a stargazer's delusion. Or was it?

My name is Jules Bertraud. I have lived in Paris all my life. It is the first time that I have ever been in conflict with the police—the first time I have ever been arrested. As my sanity has been called in question, and you, Monsieur Barbierre, justly distinguished as an advocate, have kindly undertaken to defend me, I send you this truthful history of the circumstances which have led to my being thus imprisoned as a lunatic.

I have purposely applied to you to conduct my defense, as you are not alone learned in the law; but have spent, like myself, whole nights in studying the complex systems of the stars, which but yesterday were under my feet, and to-night, as I write this in my gloomy cell, shine so brightly overhead.

Perhaps you may have never noticed a small star of about the thirtieth magnitude, which, on very clear nights and with a powerful telescope, may be discovered almost midway between the constellations of the Pleiades and Ursa Major. It is the comparatively insignificant star called Perigo. It has a Portuguese name, an ominous one, signifying "peril," "hazard;" "jeopardy." It is my natal star. Born under its direful influence, I have been subjected to it ever since. My father, who was, as you know, a celebrated astronomer, has calculated that its orbit is so vast that it takes it nearly fifty years to complete it. His last words to me were: "Beware of Perigo when in perihelion. It will then possess its greatest power over you for evil. What effect it may have upon you at that time it is impossible to surmise; something, however tells me that it will materially charge not only your mental but your physical being.

That warning was uttered fifteen years ago. I have never for-

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gotten it. Pursuing, like my father, the study of astronomy, I was enabled to watch through the long nights the steady, irresistible approach of that fateful star which was to have such an influence upon my destiny.

You are well aware how I have struggled against it. Sometimes I have dreaded that it would tempt me to the commission of some fearful crime. Dwelling on this, what wonder if my mind should have assumed a morbid cast? But I am not insane.

I could confide in no one. You, the successful advocate, and I, the obscure astronomer, had not then been linked in the bonds of friendship through our simultaneous discovery of a new planet. My wife's relatives, ever on the watch to secure some pretext for her separation from a man who brought her but little fortune, I could not trust. Even from my wife herself I concealed my growing, appalling apprehensions. It is perilous to confide a secret to woman.

TWO weeks ago I insensibly became aware of the near approach of my natal star to that great center of the solar system which ordinary men call the sun, but which to us is merely one of many planets around which systems of far greater immensity than ours revolve. It was then that I set myself to a calculation of the exact time when, in accordance with the inexorable laws of nature, the star Perigo would attain its perihelion with the sun of our system. A long series of calculations had assured me of the fact that at or about midnight of the 17th of October, Perigo would be in the zenith.

A prey to the profoundest apprehensions, I at ten o'clock that night bade my wife good-night, and, stooping over the cradle of our youngest-born, imprinted upon its forehead what I thought might be perhaps my farewell kiss. I then shut myself in my study, closed the door tightly, and sat down to wait, unaided and alone, the coming of the fateful moment.

To divert my mind as much as possible from thoughts of the impeding disaster which I felt certain was about to overwhelm me, I plunged at once into the solution of a problem which had already caused me many sleepless nights. While thus engaged, overcome with fatigue of watching, I sank into a profound slumber. I dreamed that I had been suddenly taken very sick; that physicians had been called in; that I had died and had been stretched out upon a board for the purposes of an autopsy. The hardness of the bed upon which I had thus been laid disturbed my slumbers. I awoke, rubbed my eyes, and sat up. I did not at first realize where I

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was, or the extraordinary things which had happened to me. I looked around. It was the same room in which I had gone to sleep. The paper on the wall was the same, to the very pattern. But the room had been stripped of furniture, even to the carpet, and the floor had been whitewashed. How long had I been asleep? I stood up and walked to the window. I had left the top of it open for ventilation. My study, as you know, is a very lofty room. Whoever had divested it of furniture had also closed the window at the top. To compensate for this he had opened it at the bottom I leaned over the sill and looked out. The stars were shining far away below me; yet the noises of the street, which are never absent in Paris, no matter how late the hour, fell distinctly upon my ear. Again I glanced below, completely mystified. There, shining in the azure depths, were the silver, twinkling stars, the familiar companions of my vigils. The earth seemed to have melted beneath my feet.

A dreadful feeling now took possession of me. Trembling violently, I fell upon my knees upon the hard, whitewashed floor and prayed fervently. I shut my eyes to keep out the horrid visions which oppressed me. Was I going mad? By degrees I became calmer. I opened my eyes and cast them heavenward, and the next moment had sprung to my feet again, staggering back, open-mouthed, wild-eyed, appalled. Above me, not forty feet away, was the pavement of the street in which I resided. Upon its stony surface men and women walked, head downward, in the air, and vehicles of all kinds passed by me in a singular procession, the quadrupeds engaged in drawing them appearing like flies on an exaggerated ceiling.

Still I did not comprehend. While my mental faculties remained unimpared, my brain was slow to appreciate the marvellous change which had taken place in my physical constitution. It was not until I withdrew my head from the window and glanced upward that I began, faintly at first, but soon with all the intensity of my being, to realize that prodigious thing which had happened to me.

ON the ceiling of the room, all the furniture of the apartment was arrayed precisely as I had left it two hours before when I had fallen asleep. There was the desk with the inkstand into which I had dipped my pen. There was my heavy arm-chair, my stove, a ponderous weight, which I wondered did not fall and crush me; my bookcase filled with books. Amazed, I looked at all these things. Even the cat slumbered on the hearth rug.

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How did she do it, seemingly holding on to nothing, in a chamber which had been literally turned upside down?

Then suddenly an awful thought flashed across me. Instinctively I pulled out my watch, holding it open in my hand. To my amazement it slipped from me and like a balloon rose to the level of my chin. I caught it and pulled it down. It was just at the strike of midnight.

It was the fateful hour. Perigo was in perihelion.

Brought under its tremendous influence, the pitiful attraction of the earth had been easily overcome. What my father had dreaded and dimly foreseen had come to pass. Henceforth I was released from the influence of the earth. The gravity of Perigo, in my single instance, was all-powerful. Like a flash the real state of the case darted through my mind. I, not the earth, nor the house upon the earth, nor the room within that house, but I, Jules Bertraud, was walking upside down.

My soul was seized with a sudden panic. Rapidly I walked up and down the ceiling. As I moved, coins, keys, and various articles fell rattling from my pockets. A five-franc silver piece struck against the lamp. If it had broken it I could not have descended to extinguish the flames. Heat ascends. It was stifling where I was, notwithstanding the open window, near which, indeed, now realizing the awful influence of the star, I did not dare to venture, fearing that a false step might percipitate me into those tremendous depths that, like a fathomless ocean, gleamed beneath me.

I took off my coat and laid it upon the whitewashed floor. The moment I took my hands from it it arose rapidly and struck against the carpeted ceiling. The cat woke up and ran and nested in it. I cried "Shush! Shush!" It looked up or down—whichever is right—and ran under the desk, fearful lest I might fall and crush it. I, on my part, stood staring stupidly and wondering why it did not fall into my outstretched arms.

I experienced no unpleasant consequences, physically, from my novel situation. My body, however, seemed to have grown much lighter. It seemed as if I could not weigh more than fifty pounds. My blood flowed naturally in its channels. I was feverish, but that was from the heat of the chamber. I leaned out of the window and felt the cool breeze upon my fevered cheek. I gazed again into the eternal depths below. There, midway between the Bear and the Pleiades, was my natal star. I had but to leap from the window to be carried at once toward it. Of what interest I might

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be to science if I could reach it! But I should never return, or if I did, it would be when Perigo had passed its perihelion and then I should be hurled back to earth a shapeless, indistinguishable mass.

I BECAME seized with a sudden desire to leave my study. I walked over to the door, but it was far above my head. The transom, however, was open; by a desperate spring I reached it, drew myself up easily, and crawled through. Arrived on the other side, I hung for a moment by my hands and then let go. It would have been dark but for the moon, whose mellow light came through the glass roof of a covered passageway against which I had dropped. Had I been of normal weight I must have crushed through, and then nothing could have saved me; but as it was, the thick glass roof of the passageway easily sustained me.

I was moved by an indefinable instinct to go forward. You may think it was a curious journey, thus to be wandering around one's own house upside down, walking along the ceilings; but the world to me was upside down, and the only thing that appeared to me to be at all ridiculous was the fact that the earth, the houses, and the people in them were all upside down. I wondered how the people could breathe, and why those houses, horses, and carriages did not detach themselves and fall into the deep abyss.

I reached the end of the hall and passed out on to the ceiling of the stairs. I worked myself down to the wall of the staircase, looking up every now and then at the pattern of the carpets. I crossed the hall, stumbling against the chandelier. Several of the crystals were detached and fell to the pavement with a loud crash.

Pierre, the butler, who always sleeps in the little room to the right of the hall, woke up and came out, candle in hand, rubbing his eyes sleepily. I trembled with fear, and dared not move while he went through the rooms with his pistol, looking for robbers. At length he satisfied himself and returned to his chamber.

I now desired to escape from the house. The hall door was entirely beyond my reach; but again I could have resort to the transom. If I could only reach the railings outside I might work my way along them until I met some one. I felt an inextinguishable longing to be with you, the only man to whom I could explain my strange case, and of whose sympathy I could be certain.

With much effort I forced the transom, and creeping through, I hung for a moment by my

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hands. I dared not look down into the fathomless abyss. A single glance would have destroyed me. Wisely I forebore, and commenced to climb up in the direction of the street railing. The inequalities in the woodwork and my light weight favored me. The next instant my hand grasped the iron. I drew myself up until my head touched the stone coping, and planting my feet upon the ornamented finish of the fence, I worked my way along the street.

IT WAS now nearly two in the morning, and I am satisfied that I should have reached your door in safety if I had not, in turning the corner, had the misfortune to be espied by a policeman. This man, as you know, seeing me standing on my head, thought me a maniac. He called up another policeman, and despite my entreaties I was carried off to the station. Being turned around what they thought was the right way, despite my attempts at explanation, in the hands of these ignoramuses, I narrowly escaped suffocation. Conducted to the police station, they threw me into a cell, where I fell with such force against the ceiling that I lost my senses. When restored to consciousness two hours later I found myself sitting up on the floor. The influence of Perigo had passed. I was again subordinate to the law of terrestrial gravity.

This, my dear Monsieur Barbierre, is a brief outline of my adventures. To you, who know my family history and the vindictiveness of my wife's relatives, I make this confession. As a man who reveres the truth and knows the incredulity of the public, you will see the futility of stating the exact facts in the case. I should never be believed. Worse, should I publish what I have here written, I should undoubtedly be adjudged insane.

I beg of you to exert, therefore, your inexhaustible ingenuity in rescuing your brother scientist from his present predicament without betraying his secret. Do this, and forever deserve the gratitude of your devoted friend, JULES BERTRAUD.

THE END

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NINE STARSHIPS WAITING

By ROGER ZELAZNY

"The tiger is loose," it said.

He folded the message and placed it beneath a paperweight.

"You may go."

The man before him saluted sharply and did an about-face.

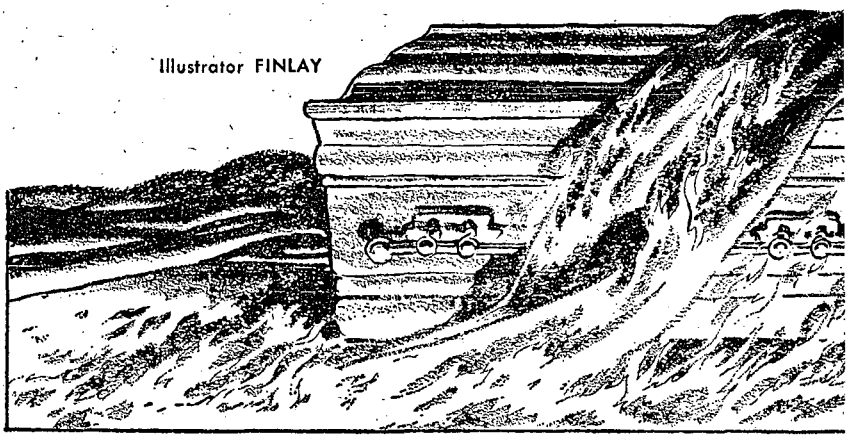
The Duke did not look up.

He reached for a cigar and leaned back into his chair.

"The tiger is loose," he said, "after all these years . . ."

He lighted it and stared for a long while into the blue haze.

"I wonder what he'll look like, this time?"



Illustrator FINLAY

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HE was awake.

For a long while he did not open his eyes. He thought of his arms and his legs and they were there. He tried to decide what he was, but he could not remember.

He began to shiver.

He felt a thin covering above his nude body. A draft of cold air was chilling his face.

He shook his head. Then he was on his feet, and dizzy.

He looked about.

A candle flickered on the table, beside a muddied skull. To the right lay a dagger.

He looked back at his bed. It was a coffin, the coverlet a shroud. Black-draped walls leaned toward him, the hangings gently a-rustle. There was a mirror on the farthest wall, but he did not feel like looking into it. There was no door.

"You are alive," said the voice.

"I know," he answered.

"Look into the mirror."

"Go to hell."

He stalked about the room, bunching the hangings together and tearing them loose, yards at a time. Ankle-deep in black velvet, he smashed the mirror.

"Pick up a piece of the mirror and look at yourself."

"Go to hell!"

"Do you know what you will see?"

He snatched the dagger from the table and began shredding the velvet into long ribbons.

"You will see a man," it continued, "a naked, useless man."

He hurled the skull across the room and it shattered against the wall.

"You will see a pitiful crawling worm, a hairless embryo, a fork of stripped willow; you will see a poor player, strutting and fretting. . . ."

He heaped the shredded cloth in the center of the cell and set fire to it with the candle. He pushed the table into the blaze.

"You know you are at the mercy of the elements you seek to control. . . ."

The hairs on his chest withered and curled. He glared upwards.

"Come down here," he invited, "whatsoever thou art, and this shall be thy pyre!"

Somewhere above him he heard a muffled click. The voice ceased. He threw his dagger high and it struck metal.

It dropped back into the flames.

If I be so damnéd weak, what fearest thou?" he cried. "Come visit me in hell!"

The candle flickered out as a mist of fire foam descended. The bonfire persisted a moment longer, and the glowing table was last to vanish.

Silently, the nozzles in the wall sucked away his consciousness.

He fell across his coffin.

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"How's he doing now, sir?"

"Mean as ever," said Channing.

The new Assistant Director studied the screen.

"Is he really everything they say?"

"Depends on what you've heard."

Channing adjusted the cell's thermostat to 68° Farenheit and switched on the recorder.

"If you've heard that he sank the Bismarck," he continued, "he did not. If you've heard that he assassinated Trotsky, he did not. He wasn't around then—but he thinks he was, and he thinks he did. But if you think that New Cairo vanished in a natural disaster, or that General Kenton died of food poisoning, you're wrong."

The new Assistant shuddered and unhooked an earphone. He listened to the words broadcast at the anesthetized man.

". . . You are death and damnation in human form. You are the lightning of Nemesis attracted by mortal rods. You assassinated Lincoln. You killed Trotsky—split his skull like a melon. You pulled the trigger at Sarajevo and smashed the seals of the Apocalypse. You are the poisoned blade that bled the Court of Denmark, the bullet in Garfield, the steel in Mercurtio—and the fires of vengeance burn in your soul forever.—You are Vindici, the son of Death. . . ."

It droned on and on, in a flat matter-of-fact tone. The Assistant Director hung the earphone back on the board and looked away from the Gothic setting on the screen.

"You fellows are rather thorough about these things, aren't you?"

Channing snorted what might pass for a chuckle.

"Thorough?" he asked. "He is the only complete success we've ever had. Over the past nineteen years he has been responsible for more mayhem than any tidal wave or earthquake in history."

"Why all the rhetoric?"

"He's a character out of a play."

The Assistant shook his head and shrugged.

"When can I talk to him?"

"Give us three more days," answered Channing. "It's still feeding time."

* * *

Cassiopeia looked up from her balcony at the four new stars. On another planet, which she had never visited, a similar formation would have been called the Southern Cross. The constellation above her bore no name, however, and the four points of the cross had once blazed from man-made hearths on four separate worlds.—Steel rood of the forges, its arms did not wink like stars.

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Gray-eyed, she watched till they were out of sight. Turning, green-eyed, she entered her apartments, with hair of tiger gold and cloak of tiger black.

And she wondered, behind her changing eyes—Who would come to tear down the cross over Turner's World?

When she thought she knew she cried herself to sleep.

MINUS NINE

The world of Stats' a drunken bat;
It woggles to and fro.
How it avoids the asteroids,
Only God and the Statmen know.
And who it was that writ these lines
Where the cool flushtank flows,
And why he cannot leave this place,
Only Statcom knows.

—Carl Smythe, Sp. Asst. Dr. Channing, identity determined Statcom Code 11-7, Word Order Analysis.

IS he coherent yet?"

"If you mean will he understand you, yes. The term 'coherency', however, does not apply."

"What do you mean?"

"His mind is not a coherent whole in any psychiatric sense. He is two personalities—one aware only of itself, and the other of both selves."

"Schizoid?" the Assistant Director asked, matter of factly.

"No. Neo-Kraepelinian typology doesn't apply."

"Which one will I be talking to?"

"The one we need."

"Oh."

Smythe, who had been rummaging in a drawer, turned to them with a grin. He caressed a laser-gun the size of an automatic pencil, then slipped it into his breast pocket.

"You won't be needing that," said the Assistant Director. He reached behind his belt and withdrew a compact pistol.

"Small, but deadly," he smiled.

"Yes, I know," said Channing. "Give it to me."

"What do you mean 'give it to you'? I'm going to be talking to a psychopathic killer. I want a gun of my own."

"The hell you say! You're not going in there with that thing!"

With grizzled crewcut, patches of scalp showing through, porcine features, and his short, stocky build, Doctor Karol Channing resembled nothing so much as a razorback hog.

He held forth a wide hand.

The Assistant dropped his eyes, then placed his gun in the outstretched palm.

"Since Smythe is armed, I guess it's all right. . . ."

Channing grinned.

"He's not *your* bodyguard."

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"Smythe! Damn it! I want a drink!"

"You're leaving tomorrow, Vindici. Do you want a big head when the hyper-drive cuts in?"

"Damn the h.d.! and damn my head tomorrow! It's my stomach I'm thinking of now!" A wheedling note crept into his voice. "Be a good fellow and fetch us a bottle."

Smythe's freckled face twisted, then split.

"Okay, dad, it's your frame. You're my charge till you leave, and keeping you happy is part of the job description. Hold the fort, I'll be back."

Smythe ducked out the door of the apartment and Vindici noted with pleasure that he did not lock it behind him. He shook his head. Why should that thought have occurred to him? He was no prisoner. He crossed to the mirror and studied himself.

A little under six feet, a little underweight—but that always happens in the sleep tanks—black hair with flecks of white at the temples, mahogany eyes, straight nose, firm chin.

The man in the mirror wore an expensively-cut gray jacket and a light blue shirt.

He rubbed his eyes. For a moment the reflection had been blond and green-eyed, with fuller lips and darker skin.

He raised the water tumbler between the thumb and index finger of his delicate right hand. He squeezed until it shattered. The pieces fell into the bowl.

He smiled back at his reflection.

The door opened behind him and Smythe entered with an almost-full fifth of Earth bourbon and two glasses.

"Good thing you brought an extra glass. I just broke mine."

"Oh? Where is it?"

"In the bowl. Bumped it."

"I'll clean it out. That," frowned Smythe, "is also in my job description."

Vindici smiled mechanically and filled both glasses. He downed his in a gulp and refilled it.

Smythe dumped the shards into the disposal slot.

"How you feeling?" he said.

Vindici added ice, then took another drink.

"Fine—now."

Smythe finished washing his hands and dropped into a chair.

"Damn! I cut myself!"

Vindici chuckled.

"Blood!"

He sighed, and continued, ". . . The most beautiful thing in the universe, cloistered in the darkest places possible and blushing most admirably when exposed."

SMYTHE wrapped it in his handkerchief, hastily.

"Yeah. Sure."

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"Furthermore—" said Vindici.

"Have you got all the typography straight?"

"Yes, I used to live there."

"Hm. Well—"

"Yes. I did live there, didn't I? Or was it Captain Ramsay? —Sure, Turner's Guard. He was an officer."

"That's right, but that was long ago. I was a kid."

Vindici took another drink.

"And I'm going to kill someone. I won't know who until I get there. But I wanted to kill—someone—then—"

He looked at Smythe.

"Do you know why I'm going?"

"Nope. I'm just the garbage man."

He passed his hand before his eyes.

"That's not true," he said. "I see a centaur. . . . You are a man from the waist up and a bank of machinery below. . . ."

Smythe laughed nervously.

"My girl back home would be surprised to hear that—don't tell her. But seriously, why are you going?"

Vindici shook his head.

"Eagles over Nuremberg."

"Huh?"

"Starships—battle conches—are gathering at Turner's World."

Smythe shrugged.

"What do we care if they take the place? In fact, it would be a good idea."

The dark man shook his head.

"They're not there to take the place."

Smythe halted his drink in mid-movement.

"Oh. How often have we smashed Turner's World?" he mused. "At least three times in the past sixty years. Won't they ever give up?"

Vindici's chuckle made him check to see whether he had swallowed one of his ice cubes.

"Why should they?" asked the other. "The Fed would never sanction out-and-out destruction of Turner's World. It might make too many neutrals cease being neutral. So they just de-fang it every twenty years or so.

"One day," he smiled, "the dentist will arrive too late."

"What's your part in all this? You're a Turnerian, you fought the Federation. . . ."

"I'm the dentist," growled Vindici, "and I hate the place! It's a violation of Fed Code to station more than two conches within five light years of one another. A world can only own a maximum of two."

"And Turner's World has none —Article Nine of the last war settlement," supplied Smythe, "but they can quarter two."

"Four have already arrived," said Vindici. "Six would constitute a first class Emergency. Statcom says there will be at least seven."

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Smythe gulped his drink.

Six conches could destroy six worlds, or hold them. At least six worlds. . . .

"From where?" he asked.

"The Pegasus, from Opiuchus—the Stilleto, from Bran—the Standback, from Deneb—and the *Minotaur*."

"Then the Graf Spee and the Kraken may be on their way."

Vindici nodded.

"That's what Statcom thinks."

"Could a simple assassination stop them?"

"Statcom thinks so—but an assassination is never simple. I may have to kill the whole High Command, whoever they are."

Smythe winced.

"Can you do it?"

Vindici laughed.

"That world killed me once, which was a mistake. They should have let me live."

Then they killed the bottle, and Smythe hunted up another. As they became the hub of the galaxy, with lopsided universes spinning about them, Smythe remembered asking, "Why, Vindici? Why are you the weapon that walks like a man?"

The next morning he could not remember the answer, except that part of it was an Elizabethan monologue delivered to an empty bottle, beginning, "My study's ornament, thou shell of death . . ." and punctuated with numerous "'sblud's", before the man had collapsed, sobbing, across the bedstead—and he could not find him to say goodbye, because Vindici had blasted off at 0500 hours, for Turner's World. But it did not really matter to Smythe.

MINUS EIGHT

ARE you the one?"

"Yes."

"Name me the place."

"Stat."

"Name me the time."

"Any."

"Come in."

Vindici entered quickly and surveyed the room. It held the normal furnishings of a provincial hotel, untouched, save for a heaped ashtray.

Vindici inspected the closet and the small washroom.

"There's no one under the bed either."

Vindici looked.

"You're right."

He eyed the slender man with the nervous tic and the hair too dark for what there was of it.

"You're Harrison."

He nodded.

"You're Vindici."

He smiled.

"I've come to kick those four stars out of the sky before they have puppies. What's the word?"

"Sit down."

"I can listen standing up."

Harrison shrugged. He seated himself.

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"Turner's World has always been the catalyst. The Opiuchuans and the Denebians are ready. The Eighth Reich will have two conches here by tonight. They don't trust each other, but they've agreed upon Duke Richard as command—"

"Richard!" Vindici took a step forward, hands raising.

Harrison stared into his eyes, unmoving, except for the left corner of his mouth which jerked like the wing of a moth.

Finally, he nodded.

"Richard de Tourne. He's old, but he's still vicious and cunning."

Vindici spat upon the carpet and stamped on it. A slow metamorphosis began to unwind his saturnine features.

His cheekbones lowered and his lips began to swell, the streaks of white at his temples grew yellow.

"Your eyes!" Harrison exclaimed. "They're changing, Vindici!"

The man shrugged off the jacket which had grown too tight across his shoulders. He threw it the length of the room.

"Who's Vindici?" he asked.

* * *

FIFTY cubic miles of steel and plastic, like a quarterback running a broken field, Stat.

Steel dancing through blizzards of rock, with an infallible pilot, Statcom.

Statcom, charting possible futures and their remedies. Stat did not exist, because Statcom had debunked the rumors of itself two generations ago. Fed had no weapon for first class Emergencies other than diplomacy or military force—Statcom had said so.

Channing found Smythe in the Armory of Forbidden Weapons, fondly studying a 1917 trench knife.

"He's arrived," said Channing.

The lanky redhead replaced the knife on the rack.

"Why tell me?"

"Thought you might like to know."

"Meet Harrison yet?"

"Should have."

"Good. Thanks to your work he is now Captain Ramsay, which is even better than being Vindici, for the moment."

"Sir?"

A long second passed as Smythe studied the trench knife.

"Statcom said you'd guess sooner or later today. It didn't pinpoint the hour, though."

"I know. I asked it after I figured things out."

"Congratulations, you've just won yourself a free brainwash and an all-expense trip home."

"Good, I hate this place."

"When did you learn?"

"I've suspected you were the Director for some time now. You've always protested more loudly then anyone else about

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conditions here. You tipped your hand, though, by having Statcom override sound therapy and recommend that you get drunk with Vindici. You always were fascinated by weapons."

"I'll have to watch that in the future," laughed Smythe, "and I'll have Statcom chart the periodicity of my complaints. You always were pretty sharp when it came to minds, though—human or mechanical."

"Which are you?"

"I'm a part of Stat," he answered, "and I'm writing history before it happens, in a book no one will ever read and tell of —author unknown."

"You're mad," said Channing.

"Of course. I'm drunk as Dionysius, and dedicated as the three old women with the spinning wheels—and as omnipotent. When you return to your quarters the medmen will be waiting."

Channing eyed the rack of knives.

"I could kill you right now, if I had a little more cause. But what you're doing may be right. I just don't know."

"I know," answered Smythe, "and you never will."

Channing's shoulders sagged.

"What part will my poor imposter play in all this?"

"The most difficult of all, of course—himself."

Smythe turned his back and studied a gigantic Catalan knife.

"Go to hell," muttered Channing.

He might have heard a metallic chuckle as he left the Armory.

MINUS SEVEN

AND you don't think he'll recognize you?" asked Harrison.

"With a white beard and a bald dome? I'm dead, remember?"

"Richard isn't senile—and he'll probably be expecting something like this."

"I'll be working for his son, Larry. He was an infant the last time I saw him. Richard won't even see me, until the last thing."

Ramsay looked across the great courtyard. A square mile of lush vegetation, an artificial lake, a row of summer cottages, and a small menagerie lay beneath him. Servants were clearing the remains of an all night party from about a huge pavillion. Broken dishes were confetti upon the grass, and pieces of cloth decorated the branches of trees. Slow-moving men with rubbish sacks were insects far below, gathering up everything in sight. The greenly lowering sun was balanced like a gigantic olive atop the forty-foot wall which enclosed the estate.

Something came loose at the bottom of his brain.

"Where have I been all this time? It seems so very long since I lived in the officers' quarters,

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there," he pointed, "across the lake. Was I very ill?"

"The sleep," said Harrison. "It was long. There was no antidote for the poison Richard used, so your friends put you in the sleep tanks until one could be developed."

"How long was I out?"

"Nineteen years."

Ramsay closed his eyes and touched his forehead. Harrison clapped him on the shoulder.

"Don't think about it now. Your mind is still recovering from the shock. You want to get this thing over with first, don't you?"

"Yes, that's right I do. Larry is a man now . . ."

"Of course—a baby wouldn't be hiring a pimp, would he?"

Ramsay laughed, and his eyes matched the color of the sun.

"A pimp! How royal! How grand and fitting!"

His laughter became demented. It rolled and echoed about the high hall.

Harrison coughed loudly.

"Perhaps you had better—uh—compose yourself. He'll be here soon, and you should be properly subservient."

He sobered, but a smile continued to play about the corners of his mouth.

"All right. I'll spend the next five minutes thinking of money and sex. I'll save this for later—"

His right hand darted behind his back and up beneath the hem of his jacket.

Simultaneously, there was a blurring movement and a click.

Harrison looked cross-eyed at the switch blade touching his Adam's Apple. He licked his lips.

"Excellent form—but please put it away. What if Larry were to walk in here and see—?"

"Then this would happen," he replied, without moving his lips.

The blade was gone again.

"Very impressive." Harrison swallowed half of the last word.

"It will stay put now, until bleeding time."

They lighted cigarettes and waited.

THE door finally opened, soundlessly, behind Ramsay. He turned, nevertheless, smirking at the thin-faced boy who stood upon the threshold.

The youth looked through him and into Harrison.

"Is he the man?"

"He is."

"What's his name?"

"Pete."

"Pete, I'm Leonard de Tourne, first heir of this damned amusement park." He walked past them and hurled himself into an easy chair so hard that it banged against the wall. He wiped his moist forehead on a silken sleeve and crossed his legs. His dark eyes focussed on Ramsay. "I want a woman," he announced.

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Ramsay chuckled out loud.

"That's easily accomplished."

The boy ran many-ringed fingers through his thatch of unruly black. He shook his head.

"No, it isn't. I want *a* woman, not just any woman."

"Oh, a special transaction."

"That's right, and the price is no object."

Ramsay rubbed his chemically-wrinkled hands together.

"Good! Good! I like challenges —and big commissions."

"You'll be well paid."

"Excellent! What's her name?"

"Cassiopeia."

The green-gray eyes squinted.

"Unusual name."

"She's the human daughter of two dead halfies, and very beautiful. Her father was part native and her mother was an orphan from God knows where. When they're fertile, those hybrid types produce either lovely children or freaks—or lovely freaks.

"Her mother was a servant girl named Gloria," he finished, "and her father was an officer in the Guard—I forget his name."

Ramsay nodded, then looked away.

"Where does she live?"

"In an apartment building in town. She owns it. Both parents died at the same time, and my father endowed the child. I don't know why."

"Give me the address and I'll see her directly."

"Good." His lips curved into a half-smile and he pulled a wrinkled envelope from his pocket.

"That's the address on the outside. Inside is money."

Ramsay opened it and counted.

"She must be very desirable."

"Use as much as you have to, and keep the rest for your fee. I want her this week—tonight, if possible. I'll give you a note so that you can come and go as you choose, in this part of the palace. But don't try to cross me! The world isn't big enough for anyone to hide from a Tourne."

Ramsay bowed, very low. His voice wavered and, for a moment, held Vindici's deep resonance.

"True to my profession, m'lord —I have never failed an assignment."

* * *

The moon hurled down spears of silver. The six racing stars darting between them were a three-headed dragon with a long tail.

Cassiopeia looked away.

The tiger's tread was on the stair behind her violet eyes. *In the marble garden of Medusa Perseus sleeps in stone . . .*

MINUS SIX

GENERAL Comstock stared at the purple-veined nose, then shifted his gaze to the tip of Richard's cigar.

"They may try to assassinate you . . ." he began.

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"Not 'may'," corrected the Duke. "'Will.'"

The Denebian's eyes widened. "You have heard a rumor?"

The Duke shook his head and passed him the message he had received earlier.

"Not a rumor," he stated, "a fact. Stat is sending Vindici."

Comstock tugged his goatee and read the brief sentence.

"I didn't think Stat really existed."

"Fed has done a good coverup job—good enough to fool anyone. But I know that Stat exists because I know Vindici exists."

"I'll buy Stat," said Comstock, handing back the note, "but not Vindici. When it comes to superman, there's just no such animal. Heroes, yes. Lucky fools, yes. But don't try to sell me a superman."

"This is my last strike at the Federation," said Richard, after a long pause. "Win, loose, or draw, I die. The tiger is here on Turner's World and it's just a matter of time—because I killed him when he was only a man."

"Killed?"

"Killed. Stat knew what he was then, and my failure to keep him dead gave them the tiger. After an hour and a half they dragged him back from hell, and a man named Channing created Vindici from what was left."

"What was he then?"

"A halfy. A genuine, fertile halfy." He touched the saint's ikon on his desk. "A soulless cross between humanity and a Turnerian native."

"They're telepaths, aren't they?"

Richard shrugged.

"Some are, others are other things. But no one knows what a man like Channing could do with the mind of a broken halfy—Channing certainly doesn't know."

"Doctor Karol Channing, the Adler of the twenty-third century! Is he your man?"

"Of course. Who do you think sent this message? He's a sympathizer, but like most academicians he won't go overboard for revolution. He doesn't even know where Stat is, anyhow. All he did was send me a message that I'm going to die."

"This place is built like Fed's gold vault."

"So was Kenton's HQ."

Comstock crushed out his cigarette in the huge pewter tray.

"It's been rumored that he didn't really die of food poisoning. But still, the man took chances."

"Everyone takes chances—like walking up a flight of stairs, like eating food. The tiger is quite real, he's here in Cyril, and I have no idea what he looks like. It's been close to nineteen years since I've seen him. And halfies can change shape," he added.

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"Just supposing he succeeds," asked Comstock, "have you any plans?"

"My son, Larry, can take over. You make the decisions, and he'll supply the name of Tourne. He's been briefed."

"Very well, then that's settled. Can I lend you some bodyguards?"

The Duke's ruddy cheeks expanded with his chuckle.

"When you leave, go through the North Wing. Stop in the main dining room and look at the wall."

"What's there?"

"Three words, in red chalk."

"All right. I'll take these maps with me. I'll be back this afternoon."

"Good morning."

The General saluted and Richard returned it. The metal doors slid open, soundlessly. He walked past them and his bodyguards headed toward the North Wing.

"Tonight," said Richard, "in Samarkand."

* * *

GOOD morning, my lovely. You have not changed. —Here, in the tombs of ice, time does not wither . . . Only . . . Only that green mark of the kiss that stops the heart. . . . Gloria! I'm going to see our daughter. That human puppy of Tourne wants her. —What's that? —No, of course not. But I must see her. I'd imagine she looks like you. —She is either lovely, or a lovely freak, he said. Like mother, like daughter, they say, and like father like son. —Richard killed us when you threw the wine in his face, but I'm back. —Smashed form releases chaos; chaos smashes other forms—rebound! The puppy wants her, as the dog wanted you, my fairest bitch. —Save your tears of ice. I'll reap two souls and root the tree of Turner! —No! Wait for me. —Save your icy spit for the souls of Tournes, when they face you —not far removed, but near . . .

"Good-bye, my lovely."

MINUS FIVE

PETE?"

"Yes, my lord?"

"I understand that my son hired you because of your—er—profession."

"That's right, sir."

"I'm, well, I'm rather tense. Do you know what I mean?"

"No, sir."

"Hell! You're as old as I am! You know the feeling."

"Sir?"

"Dammit! I've got an itch for a woman and I want to be fixed up! Is that plain enough?"

"Very clear."

"Good. Here's something for your trouble. Get me a young one."

"Where shall I bring her?"

"That furthermost summer cottage will be deserted." He pointed out the window. "Tonight, say eleven o'clock?"

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"She'll be there with bells on."

"Heh! I'd prefer a little less."

"Naked to the bone, my lord?"

"Not quite that far. Heh!"

"True to my profession, m'lord."

Rather than take the elevator, he climbed nine flights of stairs. When he reached her door he paused. It opened.

"Oh. I didn't know there was anyone . . ."

"I was about to knock."

"I must have heard you on the stair."

"Must have."

She stood aside and he walked into the apartment, etching each painted screen, each grass mat and low table on the metal plate at the bottom of his mind.

"Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you."

He fumbled for the envelope.

"You are Cassiopeia Ramsay?"

"Yes."

"I've come from the Court of Tourne."

She stared into the Alcatraz of his eyes. Dreamlike, the words passed between them as they watched each other, waves matching colors on a sunny sea.

"Leonard, the son of Richard, desires your presence in his chambers. Tonight, if possible."

"I see. What will happen?"

Nothing.

"He wants to sleep with you."

"Oh. And you are the royal—factotum?"

Why will nothing happen?

"Yes, and well paid. I've brought you much money also. Here."

He will be dead.

"Very well, I'll be there. What time?"

"Say midnight."

"Midnight," she smiled.

Midnight.

When he left the seas became chianti, and overflowing:

But Perseus of the glacier arm, sword of ice . . . The sun is burning bright!

Then, for the first time in many years, she laughed.

* * *

COMSTOCK'S Commandos laced the darkness. A tug, and their lines would tighten.

Anyone could enter. Nothing could leave.

"You got the time, Al?"

"Ten till."

Soot-barrelled laser rifles protruding through ink-dipped fronds. . . .

"Think anyone'll come?"

"Naw."

Fractional wattage; dim cottage, still.

"What if Richard decides to take a walk?"

"Don't be the man he spots. Comstock's out on a limb."

"Cripes, it's the old man's neck! He oughta be grateful."

"It's not his order, so shut up."

Stark, and the static of insects. . . .

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"Who's that in the cottage?"

"Dunno. So long as no one comes out it don't matter."

"If they do?"

"We observe."

Moist wind, the laughter of thunder. . . .

"You bring a poncho?"

"Yeah, didn't you?"

"Damn!"

Footsteps.

* * *

Through jagged intermittances of the Belt Stat sucked weightless quantities: words, from everywhere.

Three times a day Statcom took thirty-second vacations from heavier matters and translated everything into mantalk—millions of units of mantalk. Then it placed everything into categories of importance.

When the Code-V prefix appeared, it dropped all the other words into screaming heaps in its Pend-drum and uttered lights the color of sucked cinnamon drops.

The long tongue of paper rattled at Smythe. He ceased his manicuring and poked the nail-file through it.

Raising it, he read.

Smiling, he let it fall again.

Having informed the forebrain that Ramsay was about to die, the cerebellum returned to chewing its cud.

The cerebrum focussed its attention on a thumbnail.

". . . Palsy and ague," answered Ramsay, "that's what's happening. Scream if you wish—no one will hear you."

"Dead. She is dead," said Richard.

"Of course. You made her that way, nineteen years ago. Remember?"

Ramsay put an arm around the delicate shoulders. He turned the seated woman, slowly.

"Gloria? Do you remember Gloria?"

"Yes. Yes! I do! My throat is burning!"

"Excellent! Wait till it hits your lungs!"

"Who are you? You couldn't be—"

"But I am!"

His eyes blazed orange, and he raised his arms over his head. Like leaves, the years fell away.

"Captain Ramsay—Vindici!"

"Yes, it's Ramsay," he told him. "I was going to use a knife, but this way is better. You wanted to kiss her so badly a moment ago—years ago. Badly enough to kill her and her husband."

The Duke began to gag.

"Be quick about your dying. I must return her to the vaults and finish another job."

"Not my son!" he choked.

"Yes, old man—old, filthy, rotten poisoner—and for the same reason. You to my wife, he to my daughter—and father and son in double harness to hell!"

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"He is young!" he cried out.

"So was Gloria. And so Cassiopeia. . . ."

The Duke screamed, one long blade of a howl, broken off at the end.

Ramsay looked away, mopping his forehead.

"Die, damn you! Die!"

"Green lipstick," muttered Richard. "Green lipstick. . . ."

The walls splintered about them, Ramsay whirled like a bat passing through the blades of a fan. He chopped the first man he saw, across the throat. He snatched his rifle and began firing.

Three men fell.

He leapt across a body and stepped through the exploded wall, firing first to his left and then to his right.

A rifle butt caught him in the back and he dropped to his knees.

Heavy boots began kicking at his kidneys, his ribs.

He curled into a ball, his hands clasped behind his neck.

Before everything disappeared he saw a candle, a skull, a dagger, and a mirror.

* * *

HELLO," she said.

"Hello yourself. You're early."

"A few minutes."

"Couldn't wait, eh?"

"You might say that."

He walked around her, studying. He patted her hips.

"You're going to be all right, girl. God! Your eyes!—I've never seen eyes that color."

"They change," she told him. "This is my happy color."

He smirked, then touched her hair, her cheek. . . .

"Well, let's get real happy."

He pulled her to him, fumbling for the clasps at the back of her dress.

"You're warm," he said, pushing the straps off her shoulders. "Real warm."

Without releasing her, he leaned back and turned off the main light.

"Makes things more cozy. Me, I like atmosphere— What was that?"

"A scream," she smiled.

He pushed her away and ran to the window.

"Must have been some damned bird," he said after awhile.

She shrugged off the rest of her clothing and stood swaying in the dim light, with hair of tiger gold and penetrating eyes of tiger black. . . .

"That was the Duke, your father," she told him, softly. "You have just succeeded to the title. Long live Duke Larry!—at least till midnight."

He turned, his back against the sill.

"Take a long, last look. The vaults of ice are lonely."

He tried to scream, but her body was a sheet of white flame

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and her eyes were two black suns; he stared like a wild thing trapped.

She did not move, and he could not.

The ivory furniture of fascination, her shoulders, and the two blue-lined moons, her breasts, floated on that river of ballads, her tiger hair, inside his head; then everything twisted in icy waves of paralysis about the tree of his spine, until it became a frozen sapling.

"Halfy!" he choked, before it seized him completely.

MINUS FOUR

"IS he going to live?" asked the fat sergeant.

"Don't know yet," answered the tall one, wiping egg from his mustache. "As soon as they give him new blood it becomes tainted. They can't transfuse fast enough to dilute it. Lungs are paralyzed. They've got a squeeze-box on his chest, and he's doped up plenty."

"Who takes over if he dies?"

"The kid, they say."

"God!"

He looked at the figure on the cot. The man blinked up at the ceiling and did not move. Four of Comstock's Commandos sat at the points of the compass with weapons pointed in his direction.

"What about him?"

"We're going to question him as soon as he comes to his senses."

"He's the tiger?" he asked.

"That's what they say."

"He'd know about Stat then."

"That's right."

The fat man's high-pitched voice shook. His small, dark eyes gleamed.

"Let me question him!"

"Everybody wants to. What's so special about you?"

"He tried to kill the Duke. I have the same dibs as anyone else."

The other shook his head.

"We're going to draw straws for the first session. You'll have the same chance as the rest of us."

"Good." The fat man hitched up his belt. "I want a tiger's tooth bracelet."

* * *

RICHARD lay encased in the coffin of coils, tubes, diaphragms, and bottles. It breathed for him. It did the work of a hundred pairs of kidneys. It charged his blood with vitamins and antiserums. It prodded his reticulo-endothelial system into storms of protest.

He thought for himself, however, during the strange periods of calm through which his mind drifted. It was as if he were free of his burning flesh and floating bodiless in empty space. . . .

Youth's the season made for joy. Love is then a duty . . .

Snatches of old songs pursued him. He felt peacefully impotent

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for the first time since his childhood.

A flash of remorse illuminated his inner night as he thought of the Federation—the slow-turning, in-gathering, chewing, digesting Federation. The Turnerian Axis was the last great opposition to its octopal embrace. Vanishing, like memories of his youth, the autonomy with which the frontier worlds had once been endowed, into the maw of the octopus—its movements seeking to emulate the wheel and spin of the galaxy—to become cells of the beast.

No! He would not let it happen. He would live! All nine starships had arrived and were waiting, somewhere above, in a V-formation. Nine starships waiting for his hand to guide their spear into the eye of the octopus, and down through its heart, Stat! He tried as hard as he could to live.

The feelings of fire returned.

* * *

"You can't hold me forever, halfy!" he gasped. "You're losing your grip already!"

"That's right," she smiled.

"Someone will come to tell me what that commotion was—they will find you here. . . ."

"No," she said.

". . . Then you're going to wish you had never been born."

"I've been doing that for nineteen years," she answered, before breaking a vase on his head.

Old father, old artificer, what has happened?

I've failed.

Vindici does not fail.

Who is Vindici?

You must try to remember . . .

* * *

"I win!" giggled the fat man.

Tiger, tiger . . .

"I win," he repeated.

Burning bright . . .

"I'll use that room," he pointed.

I'm coming.

"Go ahead."

Get out of the palace.

He arose, and the guards dragged Ramsay to his feet.

Do you remember?

They pushed him in the direction of the storage room.

I'm trying. Get out of the palace!

He staggered forward and lurched against the wall.

Why?

The door swung open. Many hands pushed him, and he was inside the room.

I don't know. But I know that you must leave now.

He stayed on his feet, with effort. He stood in the center of the room, squinting puffy eyelids to shield his yellow-gray stare from the naked bulb overhead.

There are nine starships in the sky. . . .

Go home!

The sergeant smiled and closed the door behind him. He locked it, placed the key in his pocket.

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"So you're the tiger. You don't look so fierce."

Ramsay shook his head and glared.

The sergeant removed the gun from his belt and slipped it behind his waistband. Slowly, luxuriating in each movement, he unclasped his wide leather belt and drew it from around his waist. He began wrapping it about his right hand.

Tiger, tiger . . .

When only the buckle and two inches of leather extended from his fist he smiled and took a slow step forward.

Burning bright . . .

Ramsay reached over his head and broke the lightbulb.

"Better yet, Vindici," came the chuckle.

The fat man took three steps through the blackness, toward the place where Ramsay stood.

In the forest of the night . . .

He raised his right hand to strike.

What immortal hand or eye dare frame . . .

The second last sound that he heard was a metallic click from behind his back. Something seized a handful of his hair and a knee jammed into his spine.

He felt something, like a piece of ice, touch his throat, and he was suddenly very wet.

The last sound that he heard was either a gurgle or a soft laugh or both.

COMSTOCK sprang to his feet, face whitening.

"Escaped?"

"Yes sir," writhed the lieutenant.

"Who is responsible?"

"Sergeant Alton." The lieutenant was chewing his lower lip.

"Have him shot immediately."

"He's already dead, sir. Vindici cut his throat and took his gun. He killed five guards. There was an open window and one missing uniform."

"Find him. Bring him here if you can. If you can't, then bring me what's left."

"Yes, sir. We're searching now."

"Get out of here! Help find him!"

"Yessir."

A memory nagged him for a long moment. Then he seated himself and raised the comm lever.

"Sir?"

"Double Richard's guard. That man is loose again."

He dropped the lever without waiting for a reply.

"He was right," he told the empty screen. "He was really right."

* * *

The world of Stat's a drunken bat,
It woggles to and fro . . .

* * *

"He's failed," Harrison told the shiny brown box.

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"Is he still alive?" it asked.

"Yes, but—"

"Then he hadn't failed," it answered.

"But he'll be dead soon. . . ."

There was a sound like the breaking of strings on a steel guitar.

Harrison realized then that he was talking to himself.

He closed the box, his mouth, and his mind, and went to join the tiger hunt.

* * *

—Father . . .

—Who is that?

—Cassy, but . .

—I know no one named Cassy. I am no one's father.

—You are Vindici. You are also Captain Ramsay. I am your daughter.

—I borrow Ramsay occasionally. You are his daughter, not mine.

—Very well, have it your way. But look above you.

—I am underground. There is nothing to see.

—There are nine starships in the sky, waiting to strike at the Federation.

—They won't get that far.

—Perhaps I want them to.

—Why?

—We both have reason to kill Richard. But the Federation . . . Perhaps there is reason to break it also.

—What reason?

—It has already served its purpose. It's gotten man to the stars. Now it is a huge sponge, sopping the blood of worlds that cry for independence. Squeeze it, and it will shrink, bleeding. . . .

—That's not my job.

—Once it was my father's. Long ago.

—And Richard killed him! Are you suggesting that Richard's plan be permitted to proceed, unaltered?

—Only you know where Stat is located. . . .

—That's right.

—Do you remember Gloria?

Silence.

—Men ahead! Lights!

Flight, wordless.

Hate, an active verb.

Fury, the inside of a furnace.

Pain—

Silence. . . .

MINUS THREE

HE was awake.

For a long while he did not open his eyes. He thought of his arms and his legs and they were there. He tried to decide what he was, but he could not remember.

He began to shiver.

Then the pain came.

He had been running, running through passages under the ground. He stirred the bonfire of memory. He had been working his way beneath the palace. He was nearing the huge vents. Someone had been talking to him, from somewhere.

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The bonfire smouldered.

Someone, probably Ramsay, had wanted him to smash Stat. He remembered killing many men. He remembered being backed against the wall, his gun snatched away. He remembered being beaten.

He was on all fours, snarling. They were kicking him. He remembered gripping an ankle and hammering below a kneecap as a man bent above him. He recalled the snap and the scream. Then there was blood in his mouth and a skull in his head, splitting, and a mirror behind his eyelids, but no reflection . . .

He licked his lips and gagged at the taste of blood. He forced his swollen eyes open.

"For nineteen years you have marked magnificent time," said the voice inside his head. "In the entire sidereal abattoir there had never been another such as Vindici for the breaking of places, the killing of people, and the stopping of things—but you have failed in the only job that really meant anything to a man you once were—" His memory licked, like the tape recordings which had filled nearly half the life of his mind, changing channels.

"You are a naked, useless man, a pitiful, crawling worm, a fork of stripped willow, a poor player, strutting and fretting—you signify nothing!—only deeds redeem, and you cannot do them! You are afraid to look in a mirror and view the countenance of cowardice . . . !"

He snarled.

He threw his head back and bellowed through broken teeth. The pain in his wide-stretched limbs was enormous. His cry beat upon the bars and his cracked ribs and was broken in mid-howl. He sobbed within his cage.

His wrists and ankles were clamped tight against the frame of the great rack. There was shade below, but the hot light of the sun drove needles through his eyeballs.

He looked about, slowly.

He was alone, at the bottom of a pit, with his rack. An ugly *dejá vu* occurred as a coffin swam through his mind, drifting in a lake of blood.

The walls were stone, and at least twenty feet high. They were unbroken by any openings. The enclosure was about ten feet square. His rack was tilted back at a ninety-degree angle. The mouth of the pit was open.

It was too high, too smooth to climb, even if he could manage to break his metal bonds.

The sun was a green one-spot on a pale blue die, slightly right of center. Nothing intruded upon his view of the heavens, not even a cloud.

He cursed the sun, he cursed the day. He cursed the gods shooting craps above him.

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THE sun moved directly to the center of its square, then began an amoeba-like crawling to the left. Finally, it kissed the rim of the pit. He expected it to dissolve and flow down the wall, raining green fire upon him. Instead, it was sliced shorter and shorter and finally was gone. The square became an empty aquarium.

Voices.

"There he is," said the woman. "Is he still alive?"

He tilted his head and looked up, hating.

"Lord! Look at those muscles! Those eyes—!"

"He's a halfy," said her companion, a thin youth with a bandage about his head. "I'm going to come back every hour. I'm going to watch him die. But he still has a lot of life left—halfies are strong."

The woman waved at him, jauntily.

"Halfy!" cried the boy. "You failed. My father is getting better and he's going to live! He'll personally open your veins as soon as he's able to move!"

Vindici's eyes burned and the boy reeled. He began to fall forward. The woman grabbed his arm and jerked him back.

"It didn't work," he called down. "Nice try, though. Your daughter is better at that sort of thing! I hope you're around to see what I'm going to do with her."

"The ingredients of tiger soup are hard to come by . . ." groaned the man on the rack.

There was laughter above.

"But we've caught the tiger!"

The square grew empty once more, and the sounds trailed off in the distance.

Daughter. They had said "daughter", hadn't they? Yes. Ramsay's daughter. Cassy . . .

—Cassy. Where are you?

—Hiding. In the apartment building. There is a room—dark, cool. It was not in the blueprints.

—They are looking for you now. Do not leave the place.

—Where are you?

—It is not important.

—I see a piece of sky. A window?

He closed his eyes.

—No.

—You are hurting. But I thought you were dead.

—Don't worry about me. Stay safe. Leave this world when things grow still once more.

—Where is there to go?

—Offworld, anywhere.

—The Federation will be everywhere. I am of Turner's world, not of man's. So are you.

—No! I am Vindici! I was not born!

Silence.

—Why are you weeping, girl?

—How could you tell? I was weeping for my father.

—Ramsay is dead. He was weak.

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—No. You are Ramsay. Vindici is facade and falsehood.

—Go away!

Silence.

* * *

NIGHT. Clouds.

Stars, and the sounds of birds.

In the El Greco sky, framed by lips of the pit, nine stars were arrow awaiting target. . . .

A head interrupted the sky.

. . . Bandaged head, white. Halo of steel, crown. . . . Mock of steel, laughter. . . .

"We know where she is, Vindici! I'll have her here and let you watch—soon!"

Emptied crown. Clouds. Seas of cotton.

—Run! Run! They know where you are!

—How could they?

—I do not know.

Flight before fury.

* * *

Harrison hurried through the night, a puzzled look on his tired face, a gun in his pocket, and Stat's latest pronouncement rolling about his head like a marble in a tin can.

* * *

Youth's the season made for joy—

Richard perspired as the nine metal-blue eyes peered pyramid through his skylight.

He tried to raise an arm, but both were clamped to the bed.

"The world of Stat's a drunken bat . . ."

Smythe poured another drink.

". . . Only Statcom knows," he hiccupped.

MINUS TWO

YOU'RE a fool, Vindici! Take a good look!" He pushed her forward.

Cassy?

—Yes. They were waiting.

"You flushed your cub for us! Tomorrow morning my father will be able to sit up! He's going to kill you then! But tonight is mine—and hers!"

I'm sorry, Cassy.

—You didn't know. They tricked you.

"I knew you halfies could talk, mind to mind! You made her run!—Into my arms!"

Vindici roared. It was not a human sound that emerged from his stiffened throat. The hackles rose on the back of his neck.

His eyes became distinguishable to those above him. Two burning points. . . .

She tilted her head, straining against her captors grip.

I love you.

As she moved, her net of tiger gold snared the formation of mine, and drew it, wreath, to her brow.

There was a snapping sound and Vindici's left hand came free. The pain in his right wrist increased to unbearable propor-

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tions. His voice rose and fell through a terrible series of wails and cries.

Laughter above, and an empty canvas . . .

Words from everywhere seemed to be saying, "Come back! I hate you!" to everyone in the palace and on the grounds.

Richard moaned within his prison of pipettes.

Vindici looked up at the nine starships, then dropped his head.

"One time were you peerless," said the tape-worn synapses. "Once the arm of Tamburlaine was invincible, and the dagger of Vindici never missed its mark. Under all the passes of Time's wand only one remained—you, Vindici!—of the ancient dynasty of bloodletters. Mad in Argos, you slew your mother, tongueless in Castile, you stabbed Lorenzo —you, the lance of the black Quixote, dagger of the damned, cup of hemlock, dart of Loki—the bough where the murderer hangs. . . ."

"I still am," he muttered.

"No, you are a man on a rack, a broken blade, a gob of flesh and phlegm. . . ."

"Yes! You are a snapped firing-pin, an unvoiced battle-cry—you are the want of a horseshoe for which a kingdom was lost. . . ."

A mirror appeared before his eyes.

"No!" he cried. "No! I am Vindici! The son of Death! Bred in the Senecan twilight of Jacobean demigods, and punctual as death!"

He looked into the mirror.

"Behold!" he laughed. "Behold I am the fury!"

Vindici, the tiger, sprang.

* * *

All went black as the world came to an end.

* * *

Dribble.

Dribble. . . .

Rain. Soft on lips of sand.

A moan.

. . . Dribble.

* * *

"Water," he asked. "Water."

"Here."

"More."

"Here."

"Good. More."

"Slowly. Please."

Green met green in circles of seeing.

"Here?" she asked.

"Here," he nodded.

"Father."

"Cassy."

He looked at the world.

"What happened?"

"Gone. Dead. Rest now. Talk later."

"Richard?"

"Dead."

"Larry?"

"Dead."

"The ships?"

"Only Vindici knows."

He slept.

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Nine starships waiting. Hurry, hurry, hurry. . . .

MINUS ONE

"IT is morning," she said, "and no birds are singing—all of them dead, and fallen from the trees."

"Vindici always hated the birds," he told her. "Where are the soldiers? The courtiers?"

"All of them dead."

He propped himself on an elbow.

"'Paraphysical conversion from a psychopath neurosis,'" he repeated, "'produced when the stimuli overwhelm available physical responses.'— Channing's words never meant anything to Vindici, but I remember them."

"And the battle conches? Nine starships?"

He snapped his fingers and winced at the pain in his wrist.

"Gone. Dust—dust of dust. He blacked them."

He dropped back to the grass.

"Everyone," he said.

"Every living thing in the palace and on the grounds," she agreed, "except for me."

"—Even himself."

Ramsay looked at the sky.

"How classic and dreadful. What a man he was!"

"Man? Are you sure?"

"No, I'm not. I couldn't do it."

Harrison entered the open gates and moved through the orchard.

He approached the couple on the lawn.

"Good morning."

"Good morning."

"Quiet here."

"Yes."

He looked about.

"How did you get him up?"

"The same winch they used to lower him. I put it back in the shed." She pointed.

"Neat, aren't you?"

She gave her father another drink.

Harrison jammed his hands into his pockets and paced out a square.

"What did you do with the ships?"

She shrugged.

"He says Vindici 'blocked' them."

He stared at the man on the ground.

"Vindici . . ."

"Ramsay," corrected the split lips.

"That makes it harder."

He removed the gun from his pocket.

"I'm sorry, honestly. But it has to be done."

"'The bird-killer weeps,' said the sparrow. —'Watch his hands, not his eyes,' answered the crow."

"Stat says Vindici must die."

"He *is* dead," she told him.

He shook his head.

"So long as he breathes, the tiger lives—and he might appear again someday."

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"No," "No," said Ramsay. "I'm sorry."

He raised the gun. He aimed for a long, long while.

Slowly, he toppled forward onto his face.

Cassiopeia smiled.

"Family heritage."

She picked up his gun and tossed it into the pit.

"He'll have a sore nose this afternoon."

She helped her father to his feet, and together they staggered toward the unguarded vehicle pens.

* * *

HARRISON was right," he told her, "he's not dead."

He drew the smoke deep into his lungs and exhaled heavily.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm both now. We've fused. I know what he knew."

"Everything?"

"Including the hate," he said.

"What's there left to hate?" she asked, almost eagerly.

"Stat."

"What good does hating Stat do you? Stat's like Time—it just goes on and on."

He shook his head.

"There is a difference. Stat must come to an end."

"How's it to be done?"

He stared into the small mirror by the bedstead.

"I can't black it, like he did the ships. That calls for a special kind of hate, and I can't muster it. But there's enough of the tiger left in me for another hunt."

He closed his eyes.

"I do know how to get to Stat. Harrison is alive. When he reports failure it will only be a matter of time before Stat finds another way. I'll die then."

"If Stat could be destroyed . . ." her voice trailed off. "If only Stat could be destroyed! It used you, me, everyone!"

She looked back at him.

"Nine battle conches couldn't break the Federation."

"Not with Stat and Vindici on their side," he answered. "But if the tiger decapitates the robot and disappears, then the outworlds might declare their independence and have a chance of maintaining it."

"What will you need?"

"Nothing. All the tools of my trade are cached in the hills."

"You can't leave in your condition."

"I'll be in shape by the time I get there—shape enough. It's a long walk home from heaven, even with h.d."

She mixed him a drink and watched him drink it.

That afternoon, upon a hilltop, she purred softly as he leapt into the sky screaming fire, to hunt the drunken bat.

* * *

THIRTY minutes before Stat came to an end the ship's radio blared.

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"Identify! Identify! These lanes are off-limits to civilian traffic! Identify!"

Smythe watched through a beacon-eye that peered from an island of rock. He pressed a button.

"Bring Channing—fast!"

Spaghettis of paper coiled about his ankles. He raised a strand, then dropped it.

He switched off the automatic warnings and picked up a microphone.

"The ship has been identified, Vindici. It's ours, you know."

He lifted the toggle and waited.

No reply.

He spoke again.

"Statcom predicted that if you survived you would try to return. Stat cannot be destroyed."

The door sighed open and Channing stood blinking at him, flanked by two maintenance robots.

"Come in, quickly!"

He entered the control room, eyes mild, face placid.

Smythe slapped him.

"Channing. Doctor Karol Channing," he said. "I am Carl Smythe. You are a psychiatric engineer in the Corps d'Assassins. You created a super killer named Vindici. You have been under sedation recently, but you remember Vindici, don't you?

"Yes," said Channing, "I remember Vindici. I remember Smythe, and Channing."

"Good." He handed him the microphone. "It was your voice that conditioned Vindici. Take this and talk to him. He is outside. Tell him to answer you."

Channing gripped the microphone clumsily.

"Vindici?" he asked it. "Vindici, this is Doctor Channing. If you can hear me, answer me."

Smythe pushed up on the lever.

The talk box talked.

"Hi, Doc. Sorry I have to kill you and a lot of other people, just to knock off Stat, but that's how the story goes. You know, *Frankenstein,* et cetera."

Smythe snatched the microphone.

"Vindici, listen. We can still use you. Land. I'll open a hatch. You'll need more conditioning, but you can still be of use to Stat."

"Sorry," came the reply, "this isn't Vindici, it's Captain Ramsay of Turner's Guard. Twenty years ago I declared war on the Federation. I just remembered that recently. You were a kid then—I don't know what you are now, Smythe. . . ."

"That's your last word on the matter?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Then we're going to destroy you," he said, switching on a panel of lights. "I really hate to lose a good man."

"Go ahead and try losing me," said Ramsay. "I was raised from

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the dead to do this job. Tell that old washing machine you have to do its worst."

SMYTHE pushed the button numbered 776.

He glanced at the screen.

The hovering ship, bearing the number 776 on its side, glowed red and became a Roman Candle.

Smythe switched off the receiver.

"All the ships bear the seeds of their own destruction," he observed.

"Doesn't everything?" asked Channing.

Smythe mopped his forehead and looked at the thermostat.

"Hot in here."

"Very."

"We're shielded. That explosion shouldn't be doing this."

"It's getting hotter."

Bells began to ring.

Statcom spoke, in tongues of paper.

"Something else is out there!" cried Smythe.

Channing leaned forward and turned on the broadcast-receive unit.

"Ramsay?" he asked.

"I read you, loud and clear."

Smythe began throwing switches. Another scene appeared on the viewer. The surface of Stat was hot. A figure in a spacesuit moved about it, dropping parcels into the hatchway pocks.

"Congratulations," said Channing, "you have exceeded my expectations."

The redhead snatched the microphone.

"What are you doing out there?"

"You didn't think I'd stick with the ship when it got this close, did you? I hooked up my suit-radio to broadcast through it while I came on ahead. Stat is beginning to die."

"Not yet," said Smythe.

He inserted a key beneath a lever and turned it. He jerked down on the lever as Channing struck him.

Lying on his back, he watched Channing stare at the blazing surface of Stat.

—My Perseus! cried Medusa, and smouldering in stone!

Then the fires began to subside. "Inner line of defense," he laughed. "Thermite fuses."

"The tiger," Channing whispered, "is burning bright."

THIRTY seconds before Stat came to an end Cassiopeia began to weep, uncontrollably. She tore off her dress and smashed all the mirrors in her apartment.

With hair of tiger gold and eyes of tiger black, she stood upon the balcony, staring across the wide, dark room of the sky, her fearful symmetries of hate.

THE END

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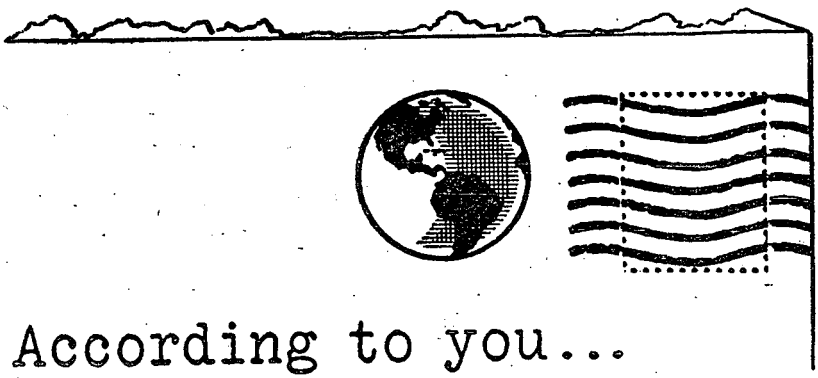

According to you...

Dear Editor:

The covers for both the November and December issues of FANTISTIC were good (though I still dislike Birmingham's liney quality) but the Lee Brown Coye drawings added real quality of eeriness to the back cover.

December, it seems to me, was representative of the finest effort exerted in quite a while: The most all-around perfect issue I've read, every story was top-rate. Especially enjoyed the Sharkey serial and Laumer's plausibly written "Cocoon" seems to be a further testimony of his talent. Leinster's "Imbalance" was entertaining. Each one of these was top-rate and it was quite surprising to find them altogether in one issue. The only disappointment seemed to be "Heritage." From SaM's introduction, I expected something unusually good and though it was worth reading it certainly was not worthy of the label "classic" which is so loosely tossed around nowadays. "Titan," is a good example of a "Fantasy Classic" but certainly "Heritage" was below par.

"It's Magic You Dope" was as entertaining as it was effectively written. This story, by employing the myths of yesteryear, presented a flavor reminiscent of "The Wizard Of Oz" . . . the three characters traveling to a castle to rescue an unfortunate victim, combatting the numerous obstacles along the way. A whopping success.

In summing up, I'd say that the December is the finest all around issue to appear in a long time.

Dave Keil
38 Slocum Crescent
Forest Hills 75, N.Y.

● *More Sharkey is coming up, both in* FANTASTIC *and in our sister magazine,* AMAZING.

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Dear Miss Goldsmith:

Much as I dislike Birmingham's cover art style, I'll willingly put up with it as long as it inspires Jack Sharkey to such masterpieces as "Robotum Delenda Est," and the current "It's Magic, You Dope!" That old UNKNOWN kind of story indeed! One of the most delightfully wacky pieces I've read in I don't know how long. Keep printing stories like these and you won't have to worry about losing readers if you go to 50¢.

I have a complaint about your use of Lee Brown Coye's artwork. You didn't use nearly enough of it! A whole issue of Coye artwork wouldn't be too much. I certainly hope you're going to make him a steady member of your stable of artists as soon as possible. You deserve another award for reintroducing him to the prozines.

Fred Patten
5156 Chesley Ave.
Los Angeles 43, Calif.

● *Many more Coye illos coming up—including a cover.*

Dear Editor:

Yay Sharkey! "It's Magic, You Dope" was really great. He certainly has come a long way since his last novel, "The Crispin Affair." In fact, the whole issue was exceptional what with Laumer and Leinster appearing, too.

Adragna isn't too bad, let's see some more by him. Coye's style is interesting and good for real fantasy illustrations.

I especially liked Leinster's story because it shows a side of his talents which I had heretofore not encountered. I think you should try to prod a couple more humorous stories from him. While you're prodding, get him to write another Calhoun novel. That reminds me, have we seen the last of that saint of the spaceways, Sir Dominic Flandry? Please, say it isn't so!

Arnold Katz
98 Patton Blvd.
New Hyde Park, N.Y.

● *Flandry is reportedly on a long trip across the Coal Sach. Perhaps there's a story in it—if he manages to get back home.*

Dear Editor:

As an old friend of the late Howard Phillips Lovecroft, I am always on the lookout for more weird, uncanny yarns and macabre illustrations, and this December, 1962, issue of FANTASTIC surely pleased me! It was tops!

I enjoyed "Heritage" very much, especially the "different" illustrations by Lee Brown Coye; E J. Derringer wrote a truly fantastic yarn, and Coye certainly illustrated it beautifully! The back cover was wonderful, and the weird picture illustrating the story brought chills! Give us

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more illustrations by this talented artist! How our late friend, H. P. Lovecraft, would have liked his weird illustrations for his own weird concoctions!

All of December's tales were interesting, but "Heritage" was best! I love your magazine!

Mrs. Clifford M. Eddy
688 Prairie Avenue
Providence 5, R.I.

● *We love you, too.*

Dear Editor:

Well, I certainly was pleased with your December cover for FANTASTIC. It's been ages since I've seen that beautifully gaudy red-and-yellow type of sky. Whoever this Robert Adragna is he sure can handle himself with paints. And surely there'll be more of him? You can't possibly let such a fantastic fantasy talent slip through your fingers.

As for a description of that cover, for once I am practically speechless. Words like resplendent, magnificent, gorgeous, fantastic come to my mind but they are not nearly suitable. My very first glance overwhelmed me and I have not recovered since. It is easily, definitely your best cover for the entire year.

. . . one more word about the art of the issue: I hope the two pictures illustrating that fantasy "classic" *Heritage* are not any example or true sample of what Lee Brown Coye is capable of doing. I've never seen such garish, ridiculous things in all my life as a fan. I practically died laughing at those vampirish teeth and those white circles with spots that Coye denotes as eyes.

The Sharkey serial was good, but just a little too fantastic for my tastes. But that's no reflection on my attitude toward serials. The more serials the better. I feel you've just not had enough.

Easily the best story in the issue was Keith Laumer's "Cocoon." It was really a story worth remembering. The smooth-flowing style of the author was in the best of science fiction's modern traditions. And the point of the story — ambition — was — well made, not didactic but beautifully stressed and nearly perfectly expressed. It was a great story.

Bob Adolfsen
9 Prospect Ave.
Sea Cliff, N.Y.

● *"A little too fantastic, the man says. That's a complaint we haven't heard in years. Anyone else think fantasy can be too far out?*

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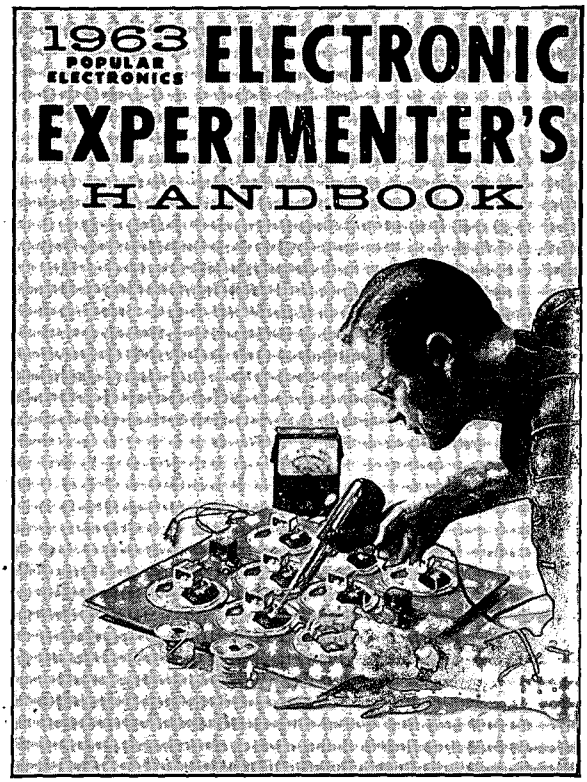

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"There was a roar from the edge of the clearing, and a huge wildfaced man in a straw hat, a shot-gun held like a crowbar in his massive hands, stormed in among the Indians, driving them back."
see A QUESTION OF RE-ENTRY
ADKINS

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